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"Have Your Photo Fine": Picturing Complex Personhood in John Palmer's Photographic Archive

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“Have Your Photo Fine”: Picturing Complex Personhood in John Palmer’s Photographic Archive

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Abstract

"Have Your Photo Fine": Picturing Complex Personhood in John Palmer's Photographic Archive

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Over a nearly fifty-year career, John Ellis Palmer created thousands of portrait photos in his Galveston, Texas photography studio. Palmer was an African American photographer who lived in Galveston from 1916 through his death in 1964, and his archive is housed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Palmer's photographic archive contains thousands of portrait and candid photographs of Black Texans, and documents the everyday lives of men, women, and children in his city. This archive has not been previously studied, and presents a rich and diverse body of images that picture Black life in the early through mid-twentieth century. Analyzing a subset of portrait and snapshot photographs labeled "Palmer's Studio," my thesis argues that this photographic archive visualizes "complex personhood" in Galveston's Black community. Using "complex personhood" as a conceptual framework, I stress the fact that Palmer's archive depicts real, complicated past people, and that we cannot not reduce his photographs to mere historical illustrations. Instead, we must recognize that lived experiences have and always will exceed simple historical categorization.

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Figure 1 Photographer unknown. John Ellis Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Palmer, John E. Box 17, Folder 9. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

The man in this photograph smiles toward the camera while posed next to a tripod of his own (Figure 1). He wears floral-patterned swim trunks and a thick wedding band, and stands barefoot on a large rock. The man and his tripod setup are slightly off balance and lean toward the upper left corner of the photograph. Perhaps the man is aware of his companion's fumbled setup, yet he still looks toward us with a friendly expression. Sunlight floods the scene and highlights the man's bright face, which glistens with sweat under the sun. The setting is difficult to discern, yet given the firm ground and sloping shape behind the man, this photograph may have been taken beside a lake. Even though the man looks as if he's about to swim, he has brought his bulky tripod along for the day.

This is no portable snapshot camera, and marks the man's dedication to taking photographs even during a day of leisure.

The man in this photograph is John Ellis Palmer, whose archive is housed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Palmer's photographic archive contains thousands of portrait and candid photographs of Black Texans, depicting everyday men, women, and children in Galveston. Palmer was a professional photographer based in Galveston, Texas, and operated Palmer's Studio from the 1920s through 1960s. His archive – which has not been previously studied – presents a rich and diverse body of images that picture Black life in the early through mid-twentieth century. My project centers on a group of Palmer's portrait and snapshot photographs, and argues that this photographic archive visualizes "complex personhood" in Galveston's Black community.[1]

I borrow the term "complex personhood" from sociologist Avery Gordon, who uses it to describe the difficult task historians face in archives. She writes,

> Complex personhood is the second dimension of the theoretical statement that life is complicated… Complex personhood means that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not. At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning.[2]

In this two-part claim, Gordon first states that humans have been and will always be complex creatures who deny simple categorization. Second, due to this complexity, a

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[1] A note on image quality: the Palmer Archive has not been digitized, so my project utilizes personal photographs of archival objects (taken on my iPhone). All of Palmer's photographs are housed in protective Mylar film, which I was not permitted to remove, and many of my images consequently have glare or distortions from these sleeves. For future projects or publications on Palmer's archive, I will likely pay to have digital reproductions made, although I hope that the Ransom Center elects to digitize Palmer's archive and make this collection available online.

[2] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4-5.

historian cannot fully know a person by examining the material traces of their existence. Even the largest archives can only create imperfect images of past people. Even further, Gordon goes on to claim that those who have been intentionally or passively forgotten – those who are absent from our cultural memory and institutional archives – are the most unknown and complex of all. They are ghosts in the archive "who haunt or dominant institutions" and whose "complex personhood" has been unacknowledged.

What might we do when we encounter an archive of portraits and candid photographs? How can we expand our ways of analyzing archives to present fresh ways of studying "ordinary" objects? How might we sit with the discomfort of letting such objects remain opaque to us, without fully knowing their pictured sitters or original context? What might we learn about photography, archives, and the writing of history by examining one body of photographs? These open-ended questions have shaped my endeavor. However, my project does not aim to reduce Palmer's archive to mere metaphor or an experiment in methodology. Within these conceptual framings, how can we still learn about the actual, lived experiences of complex persons in Galveston's Black community?

Using John Palmer's photographic archive as a primary source, this project analyses the multivalent roles of portrait and candid photography in Galveston's Black community. In my first chapters, I will argue that Palmer's photography had two main functions: first, to affirm and visualize achievement and pride, and second, to capture the social and everyday spaces of a thriving Black community. Chapter One focuses on the individual and group portraits taken in Palmer's Studio, analyzing them as visual evidence of prosperity. Chapter Two explores Palmer's candid photographs of work, leisure, socialization, and local disasters in Galveston. By capturing both positive and calamitous scenes outside his studio, these images diverge from his optimistic studio portraits. While these images visualize different layers of African American life in Galveston, I will argue

that both formal and informal photography work in tandem to visualize "complex personhood" in Galveston's Settlement. Using "complex personhood" as a conceptual framework, I stress the fact that Palmer's archive depicts real, complicated past people, and that we cannot not reduce his photographs to mere historical illustrations. Instead, we must recognize that lived experiences have and always will exceed simple historical categorization. Acknowledging this fundamental principle demands that we radically rethink our approach to archives, and that we view historical artifacts as simultaneously revelatory and impervious to academic scrutiny.

My third chapter will relate Palmer to several contemporaneous Black photographers. The photographers I discuss were established in communities throughout the U.S. and had diverse practices, achieving different successes and facing different challenges according to specific factors. While I will sketch out a network of Palmer's peers, I do not aim to fill in gaps in his biography. These photographers' stories can provide insight into their common profession, reveal local networks of mentorship and competition, and evidence the proliferation of Black professional photographers during the twentieth century (many of whom have yet to be acknowledged). I will conclude with a brief discussion of these photographs' afterlife in the archive, and will also suggest further research projects for Palmer's Studio.

I encountered Palmer's photographs during a seminar based on archival theory and methodology. Our course met in and was focused around the Ransom Center, and we were directed to construct micro-archives that featured objects from its collection. When I described my interests in African American art and photography to an archivist, she directed me towards the John E. Palmer Photography Collection. The images had not been systematically studied, yet several objects had been pulled for photography exhibitions on

Black History, or displayed as artifacts for history classes who took a field trip to the Ransom Center. In the thirty years since this collection arrived, the photographs have been used as historical illustrations, and not analyzed as historical or aesthetic objects in their own right. Judging from the Ransom Center's collection files, their archivists have made sporadic attempts to find out more about Palmer and his studio, yet had not been able to discover much information.

Looking through Palmer's photographs, I was struck by their immediacy and clarity. His portraits sparkle with the character of his sitters, and I felt transported into his studio. I began to imagine the men and women who crossed his threshold, dressed in crisp suits or glittering with jewelry, waiting expectantly for their portrait to be taken. Outside his studio walls, we see Palmer's vision of his city, captured through scenes of his neighbors enjoying parades, concerts, and picnics. It is an odd feeling to study the portrait of someone you have never met; to sit in a hushed reading room and hold their photograph in your white-gloved hands while knowing nothing about them. I wanted to learn more about these men and women, and to understand the emotional, narrative, and historical discourses that surround their portraits. As a viewer, how might I begin to understand these images that are so geographically and temporally distant from me? As an art historian, how might I begin to construct narratives or discourses in which to discuss this archive, employing both responsible and innovative methodologies? In short, how might I begin to say something about these photographs?

In addition to Gordon's idea of "complex personhood," my project was inspired by Michel de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau argues for the need to put philosophy back in the realm of the "Everyman," or to pry the pen of "History" away from elite scholars and put it in the hands of the real men and women who lived it. As art historians, we are faced with a number of choices about what we study and how we study

it, or which methods we take up and which tools we leave unused. Instead of writing about everyday men and women, art historians often focus on the "Artist" as a singular creative genius. By contrast, my project fixes our gaze firmly on what de Certeau calls "the oceanic rumble of the ordinary." [3] Palmer's archive demands that we ask ourselves how we study artifacts of everyday life, simultaneously acknowledging their ordinariness and complexity. What might we learn about photography, portraiture, selfhood, hope, and tragedy from everyday artifacts? What would happen if we analyzed Palmer's archive not as evidence of prewritten histories of Blackness or Americanness, but as visualizing a singular group of complex persons at a specific location?

John Ellis Palmer was born in Many, Louisiana in 1891, and moved to Galveston in 1916. He shortly thereafter registered to serve in World War I, listing himself as a "Photographer" employed "For Himself" on his June 1917 draft card. We do not know when and how he learned to make photographs, but it is clear that he went into the military with preexisting knowledge of his trade.[4] Palmer was honorably discharged and then married Carry Z. Mason, a schoolteacher from nearby Hockley, in August of 1921. That same year, Palmer's Studio first appears in a Galveston City Directory, as: "Palmer, John E. (c) prop. Palmer's Studio r 2513 ½ Ave D" (the same address listed on his military service card). Tragedy struck when Carry perished in a car accident in 1930. Palmer remarried between 1930 and 1940, and the 1940 census lists John and Cleo Palmer as married and living together in Galveston. Cleo was a private cook, and previously married to local tailor Abe Keys. Cleo and Abe divorced the same year that Carry Palmer died.

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[3] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5.

[4] Since Palmer lists his occupation as "Photographer" before the Great Depression, he did not receive his photographing training from the WPA or FSA sponsored projects. It is unlikely that Palmer was employed by them later, as his name does not appear in the Library of Congress archives.

Palmer's census records and obituary do not mention any children.[5] Approaching the John E. Palmer Photography Archive as a biographical project would be an unhelpful enterprise in terms of understanding the discursive function of the photographs themselves. While institutional records offer glimpses into Palmer's biography, the narrative sketch above is inevitably scant. Knowing so few details about Palmer's life, how can we begin to understand his archive? How might we tell a more expansive and illuminating history of Palmer's photography practice and community?

John Ernest argues that limited archives have had a detrimental effect on African American biographical projects. He discourages historians from focusing on hagiographic biographies, because these narratives can only focus on a handful of figures whose archives support book-length biographies. Instead, he compels scholars to write histories that incorporate a wider and more untraditional body of para-textual materials, to produce richer histories of African American communities.[6] In order to unpack Palmer's archive, I will weave together details about his life and narratives about Galveston's African American community. I do not seek to write Palmer's comprehensive biography, or a history of Galveston's Settlement. I will engage with the material archive itself a primary source; analyzing the photographs as an end and not a means.[7] I aim to foreground the photographs

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5 It is possible that Cleo had children from her first marriage, given that she was married at age 14, and was 39 years old in 1930. In the Ransom Center archive, there is a folder titled "John E. Palmer" which contains several pictures of Palmer with young women. In several, Palmer stands with two young women who look to be about in their twenties. Yet I do not know if these are his stepdaughters, family members (i.e. nieces), distant relatives, or friends. In the same folder, there is also a photo of a young boy and girl, labeled "Ours" on the back. Was this photo placed in this folder by a Ransom Center archivist, or does it truly show Palmer's children? Knowing that Palmer reprinted old photos, the "Ours" image may very well have belonged to a client, who wrote their own inscription on the back before ordering prints from Palmer. I've been unable to find record of Abe and Cleo Keys' children, and Palmer's obituary does not mention surviving children.

6 John Ernest, "Life Beyond Biography: Black Lives and Biographical Research," *Common-Place* 17, no. 1 (2016). http://common-place.org/book/life-beyond-biography-black-lives-and-biographical-research/.

7 "Art is the subject of the investigation, the target… The investigation is of culture, of underlying mental structures, of beliefs rather than activities." Jules David Prown, "In Pursuit of Culture: The Formal

themselves, approaching them without preconceived conclusions and analyzing them deeply before proposing arguments about their discursive functions.

The Palmer Archive presents innumerable opportunities for further research, critical historiography, and art historical analysis. In my limited project, there are several meaningful avenues of thought which I will not have space to address. First, I will not analyze gender or sexuality in Palmer's images. Questions of Black femininity, masculinity, and sexuality as pictured in Palmer's photographs could sustain an equally lengthy project.[8] Additionally, I will not be addressing the debate over integration's effects on Black communities after the Civil Rights Act. The debate around Black communities' declining health after desegregation is a historically loaded topic, which merits careful and thorough analysis in a longer text. Finally, I will not be analyzing the discursive distinctions between vernacular, professional, documentary, journalistic, and fine art photographers. Palmer has been labeled a "professional" or "studio" photographer, and such labels have traditionally been used to separate "professional" photographers from "fine art" photographers. While it is important to recognize the differences among individual photographic practices, these labels have often been deployed to rank photographers according to race, gender, or academic training. Placing photographers in such inflexible categories also limits how we can discuss them and their work. I aim to present an interdisciplinary and nuanced analysis of Palmer's photographs, and will not unpack the baggage behind the terminology that art historians apply to photographers.

Language of Objects," in *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 254.

[8] As an aside, there is one folder in Palmer's Archive is labeled "Drag Queens," which contains about a dozen images of male performers in drag. None of these photographs are labeled or signed, yet these images' presence in the archive is intriguing and merits careful and deeper analysis.

In addition to being a massive collection (over 22 cubic feet of boxes) The John E. Palmer Photography Archive at the Ransom Center presents several challenges to researchers. First, only 5% of the archive's photographs are signed or stamped by Palmer, and there are several dozen portraits that bear the signature of another studio.[9] This poses serious questions about the possibility of attributing the archive's unstamped photographs to Palmer, and has consequently limited which images I will discuss here. Second, the archive contains very little text or personal ephemera from Palmer. The few "Manuscript Materials" folders contain about a dozen objects, such as incoming and outgoing correspondence, saved advertisements, and newspaper clippings. The most surprising and insightful textual materials are handwritten notes on the versos of some photographs. Third, John Palmer passed away over 50 years ago and does not appear to have living children. This combined temporal gap and absence of descendants has made it challenging to pursue additional methods of research such as oral histories or interviews with individuals who knew him personally. While this project is not a biography, this scarcity of biographical data has proved a challenge for learning more about Palmer's practice and business.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this archive arrived at the Ransom Center under what I consider to be unusual circumstances. The collection was donated to the University of Texas at Austin in 1987 by Ann Catherine Brown and her sister-in-law Marjorie McCullough Brown, who are named in the Ransom Center gift paperwork. I was able to speak with Ann via telephone in April of 2017, to ask how she acquired the collection and why she donated it to the Ransom Center. Ann was a receptionist for the Gernsheim Collection in the 1960s, which was previously the University of Texas's photography archive. She served as an administrative assistant there for several years

9 In my work in the archive, I've found about forty photographs which bear Palmer's signature or a "Palmer's Studio" stamp or frame, out of several thousand objects.

before resigning and moving to Houston. Years later, she was contacted by Time Life, a former employer, to help compile photographs for a book project called *This Fabulous Century*. The editors asked her to find "a collection of Black photography in Galveston," knowing that she grew up in the city. After inquiring with a few locals as to who this Black photographer might be, Ann tracked down Palmer's widow Cleo. Ann described their visit to me: "I went over and visited with Mrs. Palmer, and she didn't know what to do with the photographs. They were in her garage. If you've ever been in Galveston you know that would kill off a collection immediately." Ann offered to purchase the entire remaining collection, and promised to forward Cleo any proceeds from a future sale to Time Life. Cleo signed an undated and handwritten Bill of Sale, which Ann drew up on a sheet of yellow legal paper.[10] In the Ransom Center's donation file, we find another yellow sheet with a few notes about Palmer, which Ann presumably jotted down during the same meeting.[11] Time Life did not acquire the archive, and none of Palmer's photographs appear in *This Fabulous Century*. Palmer's archive remained in Ann's Houston home "for a long

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[10] The word "remaining" is crucial to note here, in that it implies an *original* archive that may have existed in a previous or larger state. One curator at the Ransom Center believed that the "best" images had been "cherry-picked" from the collection before Ann acquired it, or that Ann herself kept some images (ostensibly for *This Fabulous Century* or a future sale) before donating the collection.
The bill of sale reads: "I do hereby sell to Ann W. Brown all the photographs belonging to me taken by Mr. J. E. Palmer with the following conditions: All photographs and rights to them belong to Anne W. Brown; Any photographs from this collection used in the book This Fabulous Century 1940-1950 and revenue collected from such use shall be the property of Mrs. Palmer. Any use after this aforementioned book shall be the responsibility of Anne W. Brown. Signed, Mrs. J. E. Palmer, Miss Anne W. Brown"

[11] The biographical details read: "J.E. Palmer; March [crossed out] May 10, 1891 (Maney [sic], LA) - March 7, 1964, Galv.; 1913 - to Galveston; WWI; 1912 - began [?], - till war, then back after war in Galveston till death; Started on wharf 2-3 days, saw man with camera and wanted to do it. Taught himself. 'nice' 'kind'". I pressed Ann about this scant biography, asking why there are so few details about Palmer in this list. She said, "[Mrs. Palmer] didn't have a whole bunch to say, as I remember, but this was in the sixties, so [laughs] who knows what I remember! But I remember it was difficult to get much information from her at all. I think it was the kind of thing that he did what he did, and she didn't really know what it was, you know? As I remember it, she didn't have a whole bunch of information she could give me." Ann also asked if any of Cleo's children wanted to keep the photographs, and Cleo replied that they had none.

time." Ann recounted, "As you know, most of the photographs are not identified, but they tell a story. I thought it was a really good story to be told."[12]

About a decade after this purchase (which Ann says was "in the sixties" and after Palmer's death in 1964), Ann called Roy Flukinger, the recently retired Senior Research Curator of Photography at the Ransom Center. She inquired if Roy and the University would be interested in accessioning the collection. In an April 2017 meeting, Roy recounted to me that Ann described Palmer's archive as an important collection that documented Galveston's historic Black community. Roy visited Ann's home to examine and accept the gift.[13] He noted that Ann had already "cleaned up" the collection slightly, putting some fragile materials in Mylar sleeves, but the "amateur" archivist had not organized them. He credits Ann with saving this collection, and believes it would have disintegrated or been thrown away if left in Galveston. Once the collection arrived in Austin, it was catalogued and underwent conservation treatment.[14]

Acknowledging this loose provenance narrative, I aim to study Palmer's archive as an object in itself, primed for excavation. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault writes that the archive is a discursive ground in which possible "statements" arise.

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12 Ann Brown, Interview about Palmer Archive. Telephone, April 28 2017.

13 I spoke with Roy in April 2017, before his retirement. I had already examined the donation file and had many remaining questions about the gift. Despite having little additional information to give me, Roy was excited about the possibility of this collection "finally coming to light." He said, "This collection is one of a thousand things in here that I would like to research. You are lucky to have your youth and to be able to work on this." Several times, Roy remarked that John Palmer's photographs need a hard critical look. He said, "Mr. Palmer is a man who established a business, and ran it the best he could. But what it shows of the community, and of his own skill, is very fascinating. You can see he tried all sorts of new techniques, some wacky hand-coloring and things like that. Perhaps to stay afloat as a business, but perhaps for his own experiment." Overall, he was emphatic that the Ransom's collection has its own artistic merit. He said, "Even if you don't find any matted or framed art prints, or any publication that shows his photos, these photos are worth something." Roy Flukinger, Interview about Palmer Archive. In Person, April 27 2017.

14 Roy assumes that Ann did not re-sort them after she received them from Mrs. Palmer, yet she might have. Roy also repeatedly noted Ann's friendliness and enthusiasm. In the acquisition file, three "missed call" slips (between March and September 1987) also evidence Ann's persistent efforts to have Roy visit and assess the collection.

The archive is not a finite and enclosed body of data, but is instead shaped by the archaeologist who forges through it in an effort to create knowledge. David Scott expands on this issue in "The Archaeology of Black Memory," writing,

> Because the archive is not in any simple way already there waiting to be read, it has at once to be recovered and described in order to be put to critical use. And this is the work of the archaeologist. The archaeologist recovers/ describes the archive, and in so doing, participates in the construction of what might be called an institution of memory and an idiom of remembering.[15]

In analyzing Palmer's unstudied photographs, I take on the role of archaeologist. Bringing together para-archival texts, records, and sources, I draw together a web in which to consider Palmer's photographs, life, and studio. Therefore, it is crucial that I remain aware of my intervention into the archive, and the ways in which I construct statements of knowledge from the sources I examine and collect.

Like archives, photography might also be called an "institution of memory." We create photographs to visualize and record events, people, stories, and traditions. By digging into one body of images, how might we better understand the culture and community in which they were made, and the "complex persons" captured on film? Through juxtaposing the photographic archive with biographical and historical information, I hope to offer a richer understanding of why, how, and for whom Palmer's photographs were made. As Allan Seula writes, "The goals of a critical theory of photography ought, ultimately, to involve the practical, to help point the way to a radical, reinvented cultural practice."[16] In so doing, we can begin to unpack the function, context, and meaning of Palmer's photographic archive.

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15 David Scott, "Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): vii. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-v.

16 Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (1981): 16. https://doi.org/10.2307/776511.

Chapter One: Pride, Belonging and Portraiture in Palmer's Studio

Figure 2 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series III: Special Format Materials, 1900s-1960s; Subseries D: Paper Mat Prints; Palmer Studio, Women. Box 19, Folder 4. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Carefully wrapped in protective film, this photograph is one of the few portraits labeled "Palmer's Studio" in the Harry Ransom Center (). The photograph depicts a Black woman in three-quarter profile, pictured from the chest up and angled toward the left side of the frame. The woman is wearing a dark dress or jacket, embroidered with looping stitches that match the underlying fabric. Her hair is pinned up around her forehead, and drawn together at the nape of her neck in a low bun. She wears quarter-sized hoop earrings and necklace peeks out from under her collar. While woman's face is turned toward the photographer, but she gazes slightly to the left of the camera. The corners of her lips crease into tiny half-circles, drawing her mouth into the beginning of a smile.

On its surface, this is a simple and straightforward photograph, like so many other portraits taken in studios around the world. The image is unlabeled, rendering its subject unknown to today's viewer. Over his nearly fifty-year career, John Palmer created an enormous number of portraits such as this one, depicting ordinary people in ordinary settings. Since the invention of photography, millions of portraits of everyday people have been printed, treasured, lost, destroyed, framed, and discarded. These images were created

by constellations of makers, sitters, and recipients who knew and cared for each subject depicted. Men and women intended to preserve such special images, so that they might forever embody the precious subjects they depict. Yet viewing a single and conventional portrait such as this one, which has been sealed away in an archive for decades, this emotional context has vanished like mist.

In approaching John Palmer's vast archive, how might we begin to analyze his conventional portraits beyond what makes them conventional? How can we discuss photographs that capture people's loved ones and family members, but whose subjects have become unknown to us today? In short, how can we discuss complex personhood – the simultaneous visualization and impenetrability of these subjects' selves –in these photographs? This chapter will analyze John Palmer's portrait photographs as well as Palmer's Studio itself. To begin, I will briefly discuss the historic functions of African American photographic portraits as both personal and political objects. I will continue to argue that Black Galvestonians embraced portrait photography to visualize pride and achievement, while simultaneously combating derogatory mainstream images of Blackness. By picturing familial networks, economic affluence, and milestone social events, portrait photographs elaborate complex personhood and present a visual record of individual and collective prosperity.

To ground our discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge the historic uses of photography for African American subjects and viewers. How was photography deployed in the mainstream media to visualize African Americans? How did Black photographers take up their own cameras? These topics have been the subject of much important scholarly

work over the past two decades, led by art historian Deborah Willis.[17] To provide a brief summary, scholars have concurred that the white media had consistently caricatured or demonized Black subjects.[18] During Palmer's lifetime, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographic project, the proliferation of lynching photographs, and the film "Birth of a Nation" are perhaps the most well-known examples of how African Americans were visualized in the pre-Civil Rights Act era.[19] Angela Davis has argued that these three artistic moments were critical events in which "racist stereotypes began to acquire definitive perceptual forms" in the white national consciousness.[20] Disturbing images of lynchings, violent protests, and poverty flooded newspapers and television.[21] While enumerating these stereotypes is outside the scope of this paper, I include this well-known historic background

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17 One could easily write a several-thousand-word review of Willis' prolific works; thus I will be discussing only a slim handful of her publications. In the introduction to her edited volume, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* Willis presents a half-dozen photographs as case studies. She opens with a snapshot of her and her sister as young girls in 1955, then describes her reaction to a series of historical images. Taken between 1850 and 1980, the photographs cover an impossibly large range of subjects. This breadth is intentional for Willis because it emphasizes the fact that we cannot summarize or unify these photographs in any coherent way. Instead of offering theses for each photograph, Willis describes her personal reaction to each one, analyzing how and why certain images remind her of texts, songs, artworks, political events, or personal memories.

18 For an excellent analysis of historic depictions of African Americans in paintings, drawings, prints, and photography, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw and Emily K. Shubert, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*. Jacob Lawrence Series on American Artists. Andover, Mass.: Seattle: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy; In association with University of Washington Press, 2006.

19 For more on the FSA photographs, see Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). For an analysis of the circulation and changing uses of lynching photographs, see Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory" in *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 112–29; and, *100 Years of Lynchings*, ed. Ralph Ginzburg (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1988).

20 Angela Davis, "Photography and Afro-American History," in *A Century of Black Photographers, 1840-1960*, ed. Valencia Hollins Coar, (Providence, R.I.: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1983), 27.

21 For an in-depth history of race relations and the white media's coverage of African American subjects, see Carolyn Martindale, *The White Press and Black America* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1986). Also see Beverly Ann Deepe Keever, "The Origins and Colors of a News Gap" and Carolyn Martindale and Lillian Rae Dunlap, "The African Americans," both in *U.S. News Coverage of Racial Minorities: A Sourcebook, 1934-1996* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997).

to note that systemic racism portrayed Black subjects in the national media as both threatening and inferior.

To counter this visualized persecution, African photographers used their cameras to create what bell hooks calls "an oppositional Black aesthetic." hooks argues that photography has been a powerful political tool for African Americans to visualize themselves on their own terms and for their own purposes:

> Cameras gave to Black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship to Black life to the visual, to art making, make photography central. Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional Black aesthetic. Before racial integration there was a constant struggle on the part of Black folks to create a counter hegemonic world of images that would stand as visual resistance, challenging racist images. All colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination recognize that the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle.[22]

By participating in the production of images and creating an "oppositional subculture within the framework of domination," African American photographers challenged "racist images" deployed and circulated by the national media. The camera becomes a "way of resistance," in which Black subjects "create a counter hegemonic world of images" by and for themselves. Photography is and was a revolutionary vehicle to visualize Black subjects and communities as handsome, praiseworthy, and thriving.

James VanDerZee's photograph "Couple in Raccoon Coats" (Figure 3) is perhaps the most well-known example of this "oppositional Black aesthetic." This photograph features a Harlem couple decked out in ankle-length fur coats and leaning against a gleaming car. Both individuals look out at the photographer with a sense of bemused

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[22] bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), 57. Emphasis mine.

coolness during a leisurely drive around their neighborhood. This image is both aspirational and corrective of negative myths about Blackness. In an era where the government and media depicted African Americans as criminally inclined, poverty-stricken, and altogether lesser citizens, such photographs are both personally meaningful and politically revolutionary.[23] "The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images."[24]

Figure 3 James VanDerZee, *Couple in Raccoon Coats*, 1932. Gelatin silver print. Detroit Institute of Arts.

These refractory uses of photography are similar to Michel de Certeau's concept of the "tactic:" a tool that is co-opted and rebelliously used by marginalized persons or people. He writes, "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power."[25] Though photography was invented for and by whites, African American photographers took up the medium for their own purposes. Black photographers' tactics rebel against the white institutions' uses

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23 Erina Duganne explores this issue at length in her text about race and photography in the mid- to late-twentieth century. *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography*. Interfaces: Studies in Visual Culture. Hanover, N.H: Dartmouth College Press : University Press of New England, 2010.

24 Susan Sontag, "On Photography," quoted in *About Looking*, 56.

25 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

of photography, which sought to visually control Black subjects and perpetuate stereotypes of criminality and inequality.[26]

While photography has held this explicitly political function for Black photographers, Palmer's portraits were likely created for a simpler purpose: as personal keepsakes. His photographs have multiple simultaneous functions, and we must analyze "the specific ways in which the racial meanings of [photographic] representations shifted according to the social and historical terms of their production and reception."[27] Photography studios were immensely popular in the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, as the medium became accessible to nearly all social classes. Visiting the photographer was a ritual that accompanied life's most important events, such as baptisms, birthdays, graduations, and weddings. A sitter would want to look like the best version of him or herself: natural yet posed, and visibly wearing the trappings of their successes. One's facial expression also held a great deal of ideological weight: the white popular media has a long history of picturing African Americans with manic, toothy grins.[28] Palmer's sitters sport a range of facial expressions, and the decision how of much to smile represents an important personal control over one's image.

One of Palmer's photographs captures a woman wearing a dark dress with a dazzling fluffy white collar (Figure 4). She is decked out in jewelry, including earrings, a bracelet, and rings on both hands, which point toward us in the foreground. Looking happy

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26 For more on photography as a political tactic, *see Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis (with a foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000.

27 Duganne, *The Self in Black and White*, 6.

28 I employ the word "grin" intentionally, in that is a doubly problematic word to describe the Black smile. The red-lipped, exaggerated "grin" is often visualized in caricatures like the American Zip Coon, the British Golliwog, or on "Black memorabilia" collectibles (such as "mammy" dolls). The word "grin" on its own also holds a negative connotation, implying scheming or perverse delight. Kara Walker's work famously engages with these disturbing visual stereotypes. See Tang, Amy. "Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma, and the Case of Kara Walker." *Differences* 21, no. 2 (September 1, 2010): 142–72. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2010-006.

and glamorous, she shows off her outfit while seeming relaxed. Recognizing the fact that most sitters were aiming to conform to an ideal style, these portraits are inevitably alike in format. Women and men sport similar haircuts each decade, and we can trace the ways in which dress and suit styles gain popularity and subsequently fade out of fashion. Sitters are also photographed in similar poses. For example, a single individual will usually be angled in three-quarter profile, while couples are often positioned with their heads gently pointed toward one another, creating a gentle heart-shaped outline. Acknowledging the ordinariness of these professional portraits, it is tempting to dismiss them as unoriginal in their repetitions. Yet how might we analyze these photographs more deeply? Although they are variations on a norm, why are they precious and worth discussing today?

Figure 4 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series III: Special Format Materials, 1900s-1960s; Subseries D: Paper Mat Prints; Palmer Studio, Women. Box 19, Folder 5. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

For images of everyday people, portrait photographs become valuable due to their intimate function. The portrait photograph is a treasured memento, framed and preserved in glass, displayed in a dedicated space, and recognized as an index of the sitter. John Berger writes of such images,

> The private photograph – the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one's own team – is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it… A mechanical device,

> the camera has been used as an instrument to contribute to a living memory. The photograph is a memento of a life being lived.[29]

A familiar viewer allows a portrait to be "appreciated and read in a context," and the image becomes "a memento of a life being lived." Without this context, the photograph becomes anonymous and blank. It is simply a type of portrait, perhaps recognizable from the decade in which it was made, yet separated from the "living memory" which endowed the photograph with its meaning.

Figure 5 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series III: Special Format Materials, 1900s-1960s; Subseries D: Paper Mat Prints; Palmer Studio, Women. Box 19, Folder 3. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

We find an example of this in a portrait inscribed, "Lovingly, Your Wife, Mariel" (Figure 5). This text reminds us of the photograph's original function as a gift from Mariel to her husband. The dedication also doubly inscribes Mariel's identity as a wife, given the prominence of her wedding ring. Muriel's outfit and pose are recognizable tropes of studio portraiture, but the inscription activates the image's purpose. It is again recognizable as a singular, precious object made by and for a network of complex persons. Alan Trachtenberg describes the intimate function of family photographs (which he equates with snapshots), writing:

> Snapshots passed around among family and friends usually go with conversation; they inspire stories, how the picture was made, what it shows, what you make of the relations among the figures in the image. Typically they come in batches,

[29] Berger, *About Looking*, 52.

> perhaps in sequences. They trigger memories, excite speculation and thoughts about past and future. They take their place within familiar narratives of family and friendship, adding, subtracting, or revising details, changing or confirming judgments. Snapshots are understood intuitively as stories rather than abstract truths, as depictions of events even if it's just a certain look on the face. The look belongs to whatever story one can imagine would explain it; it may refer inward to the way we all know this person to be in the presence of a camera, but mainly it points outward, to the interactive situation assumed by the image.[30]

The "interactive situation" that surrounds a family snapshot or portrait is crucial for unlocking its discursive meaning. In the case of Muriel's photograph, the textual inscription reminds us that studio portraits should be "understood intuitively as stories rather than abstract truths." The handwritten note is a sign that "points outward, to the interactive situation assumed by the image." Without acknowledging these factors, the complex personhood of these sitters is lost. These subjects are unknown to us, and can only be superficially judged according to what is visible in the photograph. "It offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. If the public photograph contributes to a memory, it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger. The violence is expressed in that strangeness."[31] My project attempts to reduce the "violence" that comes from viewing Palmer's portraits as anonymous historical illustrations.

With this foundation of "living memory" in place, how did photographic portraits function within the unique social and historical context of early to mid-twentieth century Galveston? In the Ransom Center, Palmer's photographs are accompanied by a few slim folders of personal ephemera. These folders contain valuable flakes of evidence about his Studio and his involvement in community organizations, yet we do not have personal writings that give insight into his photographic practice. We do not know when or why he

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30 Alan Trachtenberg, "Lincoln's Smile: Ambiguities of the Face in Photography," *Social Research* 67, no. 1 (2000): 20-21. Emphasis mine.

31 Berger, *About Looking*, 52.

became a photographer, how successful his business was, or how he operated his studio on a daily basis. As such, foregrounding the images themselves, rather than Palmer's biography, is of utmost importance in analyzing his archive. I will discuss Palmer's biography to provide context, yet I will rely primarily on the objects themselves in discussing the role of portrait photography in Galveston's African American community.

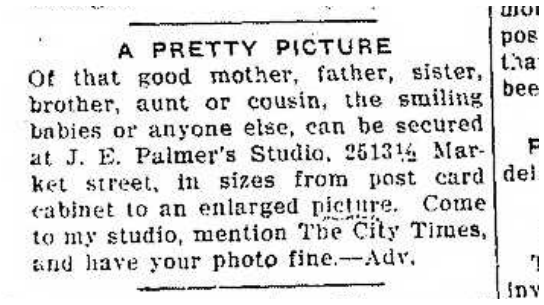
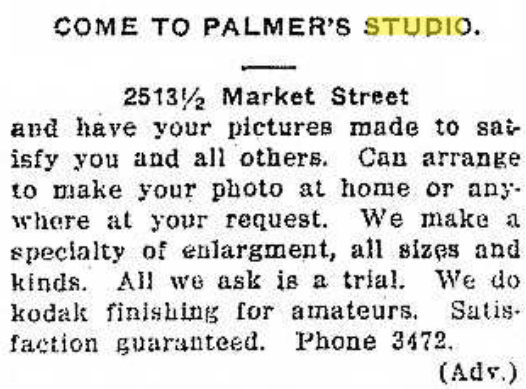

A PRETTY PICTURE
Of that good mother, father, sister, brother, aunt or cousin, the smiling babies or anyone else, can be secured at J. E. Palmer's Studio, 2513½ Market street, in sizes from post card cabinet to an enlarged picture. Come to my studio, mention The City Times, and have your photo fine.—Adv.

Figure 6 *Galveston City Times*, Nov 24, 1917. Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston.

Beginning in 1917, Palmer published advertisements in Galveston newspapers. "A Pretty Picture" ran in the *Galveston City Times* from 1917 through 1919 (Figure 6).[32] The *City Times* was one of Galveston's African American newspapers, and this notice demonstrates that Palmer advertised to the entirety of Galveston's networked Black community: "mother, father, sister, brother, aunt or cousin, the smiling babies or anyone else." Palmer's final phrase – "or anyone else" – reiterates the intended universality of photographic portraits. It is tempting to unpack Palmer's use of the word "secure." With hooks' words in our minds, to "secure" a portrait invokes a sense of protection establish permanent ownership over "your photo fine." In 1919, Palmer changed his ad copy in "Come to Palmer's Studio" (Figure 7). His new notice reads: "Can arrange to make your photo at home or anywhere at your request. We make a specialty of enlargement, all sizes and kinds. All we ask is a trial. We do kodak finishing for amateurs."[33] Palmer guarantees his sitters' satisfaction with the final images, and will

[32] *Galveston City Times*, Nov 24, 1917. Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
[33] *Galveston City Times*, May 18, 1920. Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.


COME TO PALMER'S STUDIO.

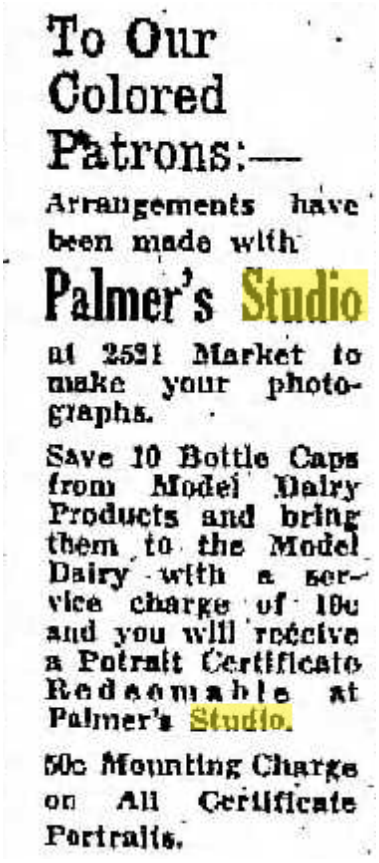
2513½ Market Street

and have your pictures made to satisfy you and all others. Can arrange to make your photo at home or anywhere at your request. We make a specialty of enlargment, all sizes and kinds. All we ask is a trial. We do kodak finishing for amateurs. Satisfaction guaranteed. Phone 3472.

(Adv.)

Figure 7 *Galveston City Times*, May 18, 1920. Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston.

even provide trials to demonstrate the value of his portraits. Furthermore, Palmer notes that he can do enlargements, or reprint older and worn-out photographs on new paper. Thus, a "specialty" of his business is to secure vintage photographs for another generation of viewers. Finally, the ad mentions "kodak finishing for amateurs." As cameras became cheaper and more portable, middle class families purchase one and document their own milestones. Yet "amateurs" still needed a professional photographer to develop and print their film. In both these advertisements, we sense the widespread appeal that Palmer intended for his studio.


To Our Colored Patrons:—

Arrangements have been made with

Palmer's Studio

at 2521 Market to make your photographs.

Save 10 Bottle Caps from Model Dairy Products and bring them to the Model Dairy with a service charge of 10c and you will receive a Potrait Certificate Redeemable at Palmer's Studio.

50c Mounting Charge on All Certificate Portraits.

Figure 8 *Galveston Daily News*, March 9, 1937. Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston.

Palmer also advertised to Black customers in white-owned newspapers (Figure 8). A March 1937 post in the *Galveston Daily News* addresses "Our Colored Patrons:" "Save 10 Bottle Caps from Model Dairy Products…with a service charge of 10 c and you will receive a Portrait Certificate Redeemable at Palmer's Studio."[34] Such an advertisement reiterates the availability of portraits for sitters of all races and economic classes. For 60 cents (roughly $10 in today's

34 *Galveston Daily News*, March 9, 1937. Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

market), a sitter could secure a mounted portrait to be cherished and passed on to future generations. Such specials increased the accessibility and number of Black photographic portraits, and also guaranteed Palmer income from a subsidized partnership with Model Dairy.

In 1930 (the year of Carry's death), Palmer appears in the Galveston census as a "widower" whose primary occupation is "Keeper – Rooming House." It is unclear why Palmer noted this as his primary occupation instead of photographer. Perhaps he made more money as a landlord, or perhaps he was seeking to avoid taxation on the studio which he often ran out of his home. The census notes seven boarders residing in Palmer's home who have a wide range of occupations: cook, porter, schoolteacher, actress, comedian, and restaurant manager. This census provides a glimpse into Palmer's home life and also gives insight into the broad spectrum of people Palmer interacted with on a daily basis. Yet this diverse living arrangement was likely a necessity. This census reiterates that Black Galvestonians were condensed into restricted living quarters according to segregation laws.

In the ongoing quest for improved economic opportunities, living conditions, and safety after the Reconstruction period, tens of thousands of African Americans moved from rural agricultural communities to cities. Palmer moved to Galveston from the small town of Many, Louisiana, where he and his parents were born.[35] Galveston was a major port city

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[35] We know from a 1900 census record that John, age eight, was living in Many, Louisiana with his father Augustus, a farmer, and stepmother Maggie. The young age of Augustus (age 29 in 1900) implies that he was born in Reconstruction-era Louisiana as a free man, yet was perhaps a sharecropper. John Palmer's grandparents were likely enslaved. John Palmer's death certificate lists his mother as Catherine Tatum, so his parents had separated by 1900. In the 1900 census, Maggie is 18, further confirming that she is not his mother. I've been unable to find Catherine Tatum in any census forms. Perhaps she died while John was quite young, and Augustus remarried soon after. A 1910 census record shows Gus D. Palmer, also born in 1870, living in Louisiana with what seems to be a new family. The new marriage is listed as lasting for eight years, and Gus (age 40) and Julia (age 25) are listed with four children in their house, aged one, two, three, and five. John is nowhere to be found. If this is the same man who is John Palmer's father, what happened to Maggie? Did she continue to take care of John? Did these possible half-siblings ever meet or know of John?

from the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, and nearby Houston was well on its way to becoming a massive metropolis.[36] Over many decades, African American families uprooted themselves from rural towns and flocked to major cities. This urban migration was both hopeful and necessary, as agriculture became less profitable and cities were home to better jobs in new industries. During this decades-long period of migration, Black city dwellers came into view on the national stage. Black urban neighborhoods exploded in population and became famous for their world-famous artistic, political, musical, and intellectual communities.[37] The Harlem Renaissance is the *sine non qua* example of this urban boom, yet beyond New York, Chicago, and Detroit, it is important to expand our geographic gaze and examine how smaller American cities became thriving Black metropolises. Among both national and regional hubs, we can trace similar themes among burgeoning Black urban communities, particularly to follow the growth of the newly minted and highly visible Black middle class.

With new job opportunities came new buying power, and the urban metropolis provided access to a wider range of popular trends, tastes, and consumer goods. Newcomers into the middle class — both Black and white — were eager to prove their elevated statuses by visibly displaying the material accoutrements of middle class life. Studio photographers were crucial to this social display. They were charged with creating flattering portraits of middle class customers, and documented them posing with their new possessions, wearing the latest fashions, and enjoying leisure pastimes. Palmer and

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[36] For more on African Americans moving to the Houston area, see Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941*. Texas A&M University Press, 2013. For more on the growth of Texas' city centers, see Miller, Char, and Heywood T. Sanders, eds. *Urban Texas: Politics and Development*. 1st ed. Texas A & M Southwestern Studies, no. 8. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1990.

[37] For more on African American urban migration, politics of aspiration and belonging, and artistic expression, see Kevin Kelly Gaines' text *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

VanDerZee's photographs exemplify Black urbanites with such purchasing power.[38] In capitalist societies, the acquisition and protection of property is of utmost importance to the would-be citizen. Economic participation is a vital indicator of willingness to assimilate into mainstream culture, yet segregation made this participation doubly challenging for African Americans, who were usually restricted to work, shop, and live in Black neighborhoods. Thus the roaring growth of urban capitalism was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, segregation enforced separate markets and workforces, which meant that Black city-dwellers were prohibited from working in or patronizing most urban businesses. On the other hand, Black urbanites were eager to participate in their cities' booming economies, commercial markets, and leisure activities.[39]

Clothing has consistently been a visible marker of class status. Usually a sitter would pose in Palmer's Studio rather than their own house, so clothing needed to be the primary signifier of a subject's purchasing power. In Galveston's Rosenberg Library, the Texas History Center holds one photograph that sports a "Palmer's Studio" frame (Figure

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[38] Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 33-81.

[39] An analysis of Black-owned businesses is another vital thread to explore, to add to my brief discussion of urban migration. Black entrepreneurship was a consistent and driving force in strengthening Black urban communities, providing both employment opportunities and commercial goods to city-dwellers. As Black urban communities grew, documenting their successes and struggles was a crucial enterprise. Writing of the National Negro Business League in the early twentieth century, W. Brian Piper argues, "While citizenship and equality remained elusive, easily reproduced images of property or functioning businesses evinced the photographic subjects' moral superiority and fitness for leadership." This layered statement merits brief unpacking. First, Black entrepreneurship was a crucial vehicle for bringing necessary businesses to segregated Black communities. Second, photographing these "functioning businesses" was vital to creating a historical record of community success within the confines of segregation. Third, such images not only documented economic growth, but also evidenced social growth in the form of "moral superiority and fitness for leadership." In short, these photographs document African American urban histories, but also visualized Black subjects as participating in urban capitalist economies. W. Brian Piper, "'To Develop Our Business': Addison Scurlock, Photography, and the National Negro Business League, 1900–1920," *The Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4 (2016): 446. https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.101.4.0436.

9). This paper frame can be opened or closed like a book, and is made of dove-grey card stock covered with swirling lines. The art deco-style frame narrows slightly around the figure's head. The photograph itself depicts a Black woman who wears a dramatically fringed and embroidered white dress. She stands almost with her back to us and looks over her left shoulder, where a shawl has been allowed to slide down her back. She holds three pale roses against her chest that grace her exposed shoulder and arm. Embroidered flowers cover the matching dress and shawl, demonstrating the luxury of her finery. Her dress fringe is so long that it pools around her polished black shoes. While the exterior flap of the frame has a small tear, the photograph is in pristine condition. The closing frame has undoubtedly protected the image from excessive light and handling. Perhaps this glamorous woman belonged to Galveston's upper class, which would explain the photograph's condition and its donation to the city's archival library.

Figure 9 John Palmer, untitled. Photo Albums and Special Collections; Series 72, Box 2, Folder 6. Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library.

Anna Arabindan Kesson explores the longstanding importance of clothing for African Americans. Though she discusses the clothing in Eyre Crowe's painting "Slaves Waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia," Kesson makes crucial points about Black self-fashioning and self-expression in the face of racist persecution. She writes,

> Making and modifying their clothes, Black Americans found ways of asserting control and ownership over their performance, their bodies and their subjectivities

> by dressing up. Fashion wasn't simply a response; it was also an act of memory and self creation: a space-making gesture. Black Americans knew that the act of dressing also meant entering into a system of value where meaning was shaped by an economic relationship of consumption and exchange. What was at stake was not simply the control of their image but also the meaning of their humanity.[40]

The elegant woman in Palmer's photograph embodies participation in the "economic relationship of consumption and exchange" by wearing the day's current luxury goods. She also controls her image by having this portrait made, which is "an act of memory and self creation: a space-making gesture." The Rosenberg Library portrait still makes space for the woman, showing off her fabulous style and power to have her image made and preserved. We might substitute Kesson's term "humanity" for "complex personhood," as both describe what makes lives meaningful. Clothing is not only decorative or an index of economic status, but a gesture of subjectivity and complex personhood. Displaying one's self to the world through clothing is thus similar to commissioning a portrait.

For African American subjects, this control over one's "public exterior" was paramount in a culture where Black bodies were under constant criticism. Palmer's portraits presented his Black sitters as respectable, polished, and proper, thus aligning with Alain Locke's definition of the New Negro. Locke's concept could sustain an entire chapter of this thesis, yet it is helpful to provide a brief summary of the New Negro aesthetic. Locke understood the importance of circulating new, positive ideals of Blackness. By showing themselves as handsome and affluent, Black subjects discarded the baggage of racism and slavery which continued to haunt twentieth century conceptions of Blackness. Black photographers were crucial in the creation of these models. Deborah Willis writes, "Not only aesthetically significant, these images do what only the finest photography can achieve: they create a new awareness or historical consciousness that has the power to

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[40] Anna Arabindan Kesson, "Dressed up and Laying Bare: Fashion in the Shadow of the Market," *Vestoj*, March 30, 2016. http://vestoj.com/dressed-up-and-laying-bare/.

Figure 10 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series III: Special Format Materials, 1900s-1960s; Subseries D: Paper Mat Prints; Palmer Studio, Men in Military Uniform. Box 196. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

rewrite history itself."[41] The metaphorical connection between visibility and prosperity was paramount: the New Negro needed to be *seen*.[42] Manifesting one's success or assimilation into American value systems was thus necessary for Black residents who hoped to improve their economic standings or claims to citizenship.

Among those who sought portraits at Palmer's Studio were men and women serving in the military. Palmer's archive contains a photo of a young man in uniform, seen in three-quarter profile (Figure 10). About to embark on a difficult journey of service, the man's expression is appropriately sober. The sitter in Palmer's photograph wears a pressed jacket, pointed hat, and slim moustache. The photo itself is covered in foxing and spots, yet the soldier's face is clear. His eyes draw us in and create a vertical line with his white tie and gleaming jacket buttons. This verticality is accentuated by the curtain behind the sitter, whose folds reach from the top to the bottom of the frame. The art deco frame further draws out this balanced clarity by complementing the symmetry of the image, in decorative thin

41 In summarizing the major points of Locke's argument, I have relied on Deborah Willis Thomas' text *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (2000).

42 Piper's text on the National Negro Business League emphasizes this metaphor. "Advocates of Black capitalism routinely deployed metaphors of sight, light, and vision to urge on their peers through the demonstration of achievement." Piper, "To Develop Our Business," 436.

black lines and rounded floral vignettes. The portrait radiates a sense of assured composure. Beyond its formal beauty, what more can we understand about this photograph? What were the political and social implications of military portraits of Black men?

Figure 11 Photographer unknown. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Palmer, John E. Box 17, Folder 10. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Palmer himself served in a "Colored" Army unit during World War I: the 24th Infantry Regiment, founded in 1869. The Ransom Center archive contains one image that possibly shows Palmer in uniform (Figure 11).[43] Like most other African American regiments, the 24th did not serve overseas. It instead built military facilities in Harris County (which encompasses the Houston metro area). Perhaps Palmer's military service helped him empathize with the Black recruits who came to his studio for portraits. Knowing that his service was self-motivated (and that he volunteered to serve in World War II), we might speculate that Palmer understood the drive to serve one's country despite the disenfranchisement African American men experienced at home.

400,000 African Americans enlisted in the racially segregated military between 1917 and 1918. Volunteering for the military was a powerful gesture, as Black men and

[43] It is difficult to say whether or not this is a photo of Palmer. While the object does not look old (it is printed on newer paper, and not creased or damaged), the image is cloudy and has little contrast, which suggests it is a reprint of an older image. Its blurriness and areas of lost background or definition might be due to the age of the source print. In the Ransom Center, this photo is housed in the "John E. Palmer" folder, which contains many images of Palmer himself. Yet it is impossible to know whether an archivist saw a likeness and put this photo in this folder, or if it was certain to be a photo of Palmer upon acquisition (if it was originally found with other photos of Palmer, or Cleo confirmed it was Palmer in uniform).

women sought to prove their allegiance to the nation and strengthen their own claims to citizenship. While only 10% of African American soldiers saw combat in Europe, photographs of World War I recruits in full uniform visualize their pride and determination.[44] David Wallace writes that photographs of Black soldiers represented "the picturable prospect of a new national subject, one fully assimilable into the imagined body politic: namely, the African American male as soldier and, thus, would-be citizen." Yet "the barely free – the colored recruit" does not fully obtain this desired citizenship. The Black soldier's national belonging is only momentarily achieved through their military portrait. Wallace continues, "Very powerfully, photography made visible — to the point of near advertisement — Black male bodies no longer outside of the law as ciphers to its civil and human rights but directly beneath its custodial thumb." [45] As servicemen trapped at home, African Americans felt the sting of this contradiction: seeking to display their own patriotism and improve their civil standing, yet ultimately trapped below the government's "custodial thumb" that policed their race.

Palmer and other Black soldiers felt this crushing racism extend into the military. At best, these racist policies was exclusionary, such as those preventing most Black soldiers from serving overseas. At worst, the military's entrenched racism proved fatal for Black servicemen. Two months after Palmer's enlistment, the 24th Infantry Regiment became infamous for the Camp Logan riot, in which 150 Black soldiers marched on Houston to protest mistreatment and abuse by local police. These riots resulted in the deaths of four soldiers, 12 policemen, and four civilians. The Black soldiers deemed culpable were subsequently tried at three courts-martial for mutiny. Nineteen soldiers were executed, and

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44 Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 37.

45 Maurice O Wallace, "Framing the Black Soldier: Image, Uplift, and the Duplicity of Pictures," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Shawn Michelle Smith, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 244-251.

41 were sentenced to life in prison.[46] Palmer was likely not involved in the riots, given that he later rose to the rank of Corporal and was honorably discharged in 1919. Yet in the first months of his service, Palmer witnessed dozens of his fellow Black infantry members tried or killed for protesting domestic racism.

While the military held promises of social and economic improvement for African Americans, these aspirations proved ultimately to be pipe dreams. For this reason, Black men and women of all ages often turned to religious and fraternal organizations for a sense of belonging, security, and personal improvement. Palmer was a member of Galveston's Elk, Mason, and Desert of Texas societies, belonging to the Black chapters of each national fraternity. He rose to the highest possible rank of 33rd Degree in the Holy Royal Arch Masons, served as the president for the State Lodge of Elks for at least the year 1944, and was the Imperial Deputy of the Desert for the Desert of Texas, or A.E.A.O.N.M.S (Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order Nobles Mystic Shrine). While Palmer was most likely attached to a church, I have been unable to confirm if he belonged to a specific congregation. His archive at the Ransom Center contains multiple objects and photographs that document his activities and status in fraternal organizations, and for this reason, the following discussion will focus on Black fraternal societies instead of churches.[47]

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46 "Houston Riot of 1917." *Wikipedia*, January 20, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Houston_riot_of_1917&oldid=821514496.

47 However, Palmer's archive contains two signed photographs of church groups. One features a group of men and women dated 4/28/47, and the second is labeled "Corner-Stone Laying, St. John Baptist Church, 29th Ave, Galveston, Texas, Sept 23 '45. Rev. A.H. Wilson, Pastor. I. Payton, Clerk."

One photo depicts Palmer alongside fellow Masons who received the 33rd Degree on February 23rd, 1950 (Figure 12), dubbed the "Osborne Audrey Crenshaw Class." Printed on Palmer's Mason letterhead, a memo in the archive's "Outgoing Correspondence" folder describes the ceremony.[48] While Palmer posed for the photo, he likely printed the image, as the handwriting match the "Palmer's Studio" signature on several earlier photographs. We see Palmer on the left end of the second row, standing slim in a black tuxedo and looking straight into the camera. He holds himself tall and angles his body easily toward the camera. A pocket watch chain crosses his tuxedo, and a white handkerchief provides a pop of brightness. The other men are attired in suits, and Palmer stands out as

Figure 12 Photographer unknown. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries C: Social Events and Activities; Fraternal Societies. Box 7, Folder 4. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

48 The notice, printed by Palmer himself, reads: "12 RECEIVE 33rd MASONIC DEGREES. J.E. Palmer, 1514-22nd St. Galveston Texas, and 11 other masons received the honorary 33rd degree at a two-day meeting in El Paso, Texas. The class was named the OSBORNE AUDREY CRENSHAW class. The meeting, which was attended by six National and Regional officers of the Ancient and Accepted Rite of Freemasonry, Southern jurisdiction, closed with a banquet in the Masonic Temple at 405 South Virginia Street last night." The announcement also notes which Masonic dignitaries were there: Dr. Willard Allen from Baltimore, John G. Lewis from Baton Rouge, Louis W. Roy from Washington D.C., L. L. Lockhart from Fort Worth, Edward D. Johnson from San Antonio, and Milton L. Ward of Houston. O. Paynes is identified in the photography, but not mentioned in Palmer's notice. Palmer's letterhead reads: J.E. Palmer, 32°, Deputy Grand High Priest at Large, Grand Lecturer. P.O. Box 384, 2505 ½ Market St, Telephone 7323. Holy Royal Arch Masons of Texas, Galveston, TX. Palmer, John. "12 RECEIVE 33rd MASONIC DEGREES," ca. 1890s-1960s. Subseries F. Manuscript Materials, Outgoing Correspondence, 20.17. John E. Palmer Collection.

the only one in black tie. In the back row, seven men wear ceremonial round hats that denote their higher status in the Masonic Temple.

Black fraternal organizations for men and women have been popular for centuries. African American freemasonry dates back to 1775, when Prince Hall and 14 other free Black artisans in Boston opened a "coloured lodge" of the Ancient and Accepted Order of Freemasons. Prince Hall saw freemasonry as a form of "masculine authentication," where enslaved and free Black New Englanders could "prove and link their manliness to the building of nationhood.[49]" Hall was seen as a model of Black masculinity: the artisan embodied ideals of the self-made man, productive craftsman, and virtuous citizen. Such tenets remain foundational to Black fraternal organizations today. In Galveston, organizations like the Freemasons held meetings and lectures, hosted social events, and established local and national philanthropic networks. During a time where government funding to African American communities was virtually nonexistent, fraternal organizations and churches provided crucial support networks. In addition to numerous group portraits, Palmer documents these clubs' banquets, pageants, and raffles. The number of these photos and the organizations' popularity evidence the importance of fraternal societies in Galveston's African American community. Membership within a group demonstrated one's commitment to community and personal improvement. Like a portrait photograph, these societies further enacted the social ritual of putting one's best foot forward: members literally embodied middle-class values by dressing up for and participating in local social and philanthropic events.

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[49] Maurice O. Wallace, "'Are We Men?': Prince Hall, Martin Delany and the Black Masculine Ideal in Black Freemasonry, 1775-1865," in *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (A John Hope Franklin Center Book. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 53-81.

In conclusion, the value of Palmer's photographs comes from two primary discursive functions. First, these photographs visualize a sense of prosperity and community belonging, rebelling against stereotypes of Blackness that circulated in the mainstream media. Second, the images are imbued with value through their original function as intimate or communal keepsakes. The images are activated, so to speak, by their connections to complex persons. Both the subjects photographed and the owners of these photographs give the images their inherent meaning, because of their strongly felt emotional and memory attachments to the photos.

In the hands of their intended original recipients, these portraits came alive. bell hooks models this phenomenon while describing a photo of her father. She writes that this snapshot embodies her and her sister's complicated relationships with him: "I want to rescue and preserve this image of our father, not let it be forgotten…Such is the power of the photography, of the image, that it can give back and take away, that it can bind.[50] Beneath its surface, a portrait's meaning exists on simultaneous and expanded planes, created by a viewer's psychic associations. A photograph is understood differently by each new viewer, and thus the object has no final discursive meaning or function. This makes it challenging to analyze Palmer's archive, especially given my immense mental distance from his subjects. Yet rather than step away from this archive, what are our options? Alan Trachtenberg proposes, "We can construct an alternative both to the old idea of revelation and the new idea of unknowability, the alternative of story telling. It's a conversational, dialogical alternative; it sees the image not as a translatable proposition about its depicted figures but as an occasion for unlimited hypotheses."[51] I hope to analyze Palmer's photographs "as an occasion for unlimited hypotheses" about the complex personhood of

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[50] Ibid, 56.

[51] Trachtenberg, "Lincoln's Smile," 22.

their subjects. As such, this archival work does not seek to "translate" the subjects and scenes captured on film. Rather, the archive becomes an opportunity to discuss photography's many discursive functions in Galveston's Black community and beyond.

After 11 days in the hospital, John Palmer passed away on March 7th, 1964 from a heart attack brought on by arteriosclerotic heart disease.[52] His death certificate describes him as a photographer, married to Cleo Palmer, who had been residing in Galveston since 1916. It has been over fifty years since Palmer passed away, yet his photographs seem to vibrate with a tangible liveliness. Frederick Douglass also thought that photography possessed such power and could defy the finality of death; he called the photograph a "Revenant." Laura Wexler writes, "Douglass believed that the formerly enslaved could reverse the social death that defined slavery with another objectifying flash: this time creating a positive image of the social life of freedom and proving that African American consciousness had been there all along… An avatar of social progress, the photographic Revenant enlivens the present and hails a better world."[53]

Palmer's archive pictures ordinary individuals, yet this ordinariness does not render the images mundane. Rather, the archive is important because of its ordinariness. The vast majority of the photographs are unlabeled, rendering their subjects unknown to today's viewer. However, we cannot overstate that this is an unintended consequence of the passing of time. The images were not made to be an index of "the oceanic rumble of the ordinary" — of nameless faces organized by an archivist — but were made to hold stories of known people and places. Recognizing the complex personhood of these ordinary people turns the archive into a Revenant; it "enlivens the present and hails a better world."

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[52] Although he was not young, his passing at age 72 was likely hastened by a love of smoking; he is rarely photographed without a cigar in hand.

[53] Laura Wexler, "'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation," in *Pictures and Progress,* 19-20.

Chapter Two: Outside the Studio: Photographing Everyday Life in Galveston

Figure 13 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Automobiles and People. Box 17, Folder 3. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

In Palmer's archive, we find one snapshot of a man and woman leaning against a Pontiac (Figure 13). The two are engaged in friendly conversation, and do not acknowledge the photographer. On the right, the woman leans on the car with her right hand, and her left is tucked behind her back. She wears a light colored skirt and a buttoned-up top made of lightweight fabric. The man is also in his shirtsleeves, leading us to believe that this photo was taken on a warm day. Yet most days in Galveston are warm enough for such thin garments, where tropical breezes roll off the Gulf year-round. Beyond the parking lot, we see palm trees, telephone wires, and a sign for Lozano's Paint and Body Shop. We also see what might be storage tanks or silos in the distance, framed perfectly between the subjects' heads. The cars surrounding the conversing couple gleam in the hazy sunlight. Only upon closer inspection do we notice the rim of dirt just above the rear hatch of the Pontiac. The

woman leans delicately on its trunk, fingers tented, and smiles in mid-sentence. The man returns her attentive gaze, lips slightly parted, and listens to her with a content expression.

This photograph invites endless speculation: what is taking place here? Is this a used car lot, where the woman is considering a purchase from this salesman? Is this one enormous lot belonging to Lozano's shop? Have these two people simply run into each other by chance, and stopped for a moment of rest and conversation? Why would Palmer have captured this ambiguous event? How well does he know these two people? Without additional information, we cannot answer such questions using only Palmer's archive at the Ransom Center. Yet we might discover more about this image by showing it to current Galvestonians, asking if they recognize either a person or location in this photograph. Still, without interviews or community members' memories, what might we learn from the photograph? How can we study snapshots when their histories are unavailable to us? In short: how can we approach such photographs as they exist in the archive?

Avery Gordon's definition of "complex personhood" reminds us to be cognizant of the ways in which the archive minimizes the "enormously subtle meaning" of past people's everyday lives. The archive leaves only fragments of lived experiences, and we cannot claim to understand past persons by examining only these material tatters and scraps of life. With this cautionary note in mind, I seek to argue that the following: while Palmer's archival snapshots offer decontextualized glimpses of Black life in Galveston in the mid-twentieth century, we can still discuss how his photographs visualize complex personhood. By analyzing these images of urban and social spaces, we might gain a more nuanced and textured understanding of everyday life in Galveston's African American community. However, to provide another disclaimer, I do not aim to uncover any monolithic, unifying truths about Black life as seen through Palmer's photographs. As Erina Duganne writes, it is important to examine Black photographers and photographed subjects "without reducing

[them] into overly broad categories of identity or discussing them and their representations through such binary oppositions as Black/white, insider/outsider, and positive/negative images."[54] I do not wish to position Palmer as a omnipotent documentarian who presents an "authentic" vision of Galveston's Black history. Instead, Palmer's archive represents one viewpoint through which we have access to the past. We should ground Palmer's subjectivity (and those of his subjects) "within the processes of social relations instead of within essentialized notions of race."[55]

We can see Palmer as an "Everyman," or narrator, whose photographs guide us through the "oceanic rumble" of everyday life in Galveston. Yet it is important to reiterate one concept: any community's "oceanic rumble" is made up of many diverse, unique, and often contradictory people. The community is "a flexible and continuous mass… a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one." Each Everyman belongs to this mass, but is also a complex person who cannot be summarized in one teleological narrative. Palmer is a single individual and is not an oracle of his community history. De Certeau writes in this vein,

> It is thus useless to set off in quest of this voice that has been simultaneously colonized and mythified by recent Western history. There is, moreover, no such 'pure' voice, because it is always determined by a system (whether social, familial, or other) and codified by a way of receiving it… Thus we must give up the fiction that collects all these sounds under the sign of a 'Voice,' of a 'Culture' of its own – or of the great Other's.[56]

Is it then impossible to analyze, narrate, or understand Palmer's photographs? Certainly we should not give up our project here. While every artist's vision is "determined by a system,"

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54 Duganne, *The Self in Black and White*, 4.

55 Ibid, 5.

56 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*,, 132.

how can we break free of the "codified… way of receiving it?" As art historians, how can we move beyond searching for the "'pure' voice?" As de Certeau cautions, it is doubly important to approach Palmer's archive of Black subjects with care. African American subjects have often "simultaneously colonized and mythified," and historiographically reduced to a monolithic "Other." I do not provide this conceptual framework in order to refute the possibility of uncovering novel and important knowledge about Palmer or Galveston's Black community. Rather, I hope to posit that Palmer's photographs, my reading of them, and my retelling of Galveston's history represents one potential history which can be told. In Galveston alone, there are tens of thousands of voices which make up "the oceanic rumble of the ordinary," and my analysis of "the ordinary" in Palmer's photographs is but one among this historical choir.

Palmer's archive contains dozens of candid photographs that have been sorted into folders such as "Bar Photographs," "Baseball Teams," "Places of Business," and "Automobiles and People."[57] In "Views of Galveston," we find a photograph signed "Palmer Photo, 4/24/47," depicting a white house with a picket fence (Figure 14). Standing across the street, Palmer captures the residence at a slight angle rather than head-on. Wide white boards wrap around the first floor, and two windows with black shutters pop out from the roofline. The porch has a bannister which matches the fence, featuring carved decorations and a delicate trim where the columns touch the roof above. Above the front

[57] While we do not know how the collection arrived at the University, it is understandable that the Ransom Center archivists needed to categorize and label the collection for research access. In using Palmer's collection, I have constantly questioned how the archive was organized and processed. This issue could sustain its own chapter in a future research project, but I do not have space to responsibly discuss it here.

Figure 14 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Views of Galveston. Box 17, Folder 15. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

door, "1816" is painted on dark wood numbers. The yard is full of fluffy, well-tended greenery, and the porch features a pair of potted plants and wooden chairs that frame the front door. Like most in Galveston, this house is built on platforms to guard it from floodwaters that regularly sweep the island. This photograph inspires several questions, first of which is: whose home is this? According to census records, Palmer never lived at an address beginning with "1816." Why did Palmer photograph this house? Why did he sign and date this image, which he very rarely does? How can we begin to analyze this image without knowing answers to these questions?

Any house, neighborhood, city is known best by those who have lived or still live there. Residents superimpose frameworks of ownership, belonging, and lived experience onto physical environments, transforming landscapes into sites of past and present importance. Without memory, our physical world is simply made up of blank and empty obstacles. How do we see and remember our physical world? How can we unpack meaning from images of our environment, or foreign environments which we have never experienced firsthand? Photographs let us glimpse a city as it appeared in the past, but like studio portraits, these images can become static and anonymous when divorced from "living memory." John Berger discusses this quandary in depth, writing:

> The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supercession of future images. It holds them unchanging. And before the invention of the camera nothing could do this, except, in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory… Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions.[58]

In our effort to understand the functions of Palmer's photographs, it is necessary that we attempt to reconstruct their original meanings, found "in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory" of Galvestonians. I call this the "memory context" that formerly framed each image. By recovering this memory context – the photographs' original meanings and intended functions – we might come to better understand the archive and the everyday spaces of Galveston. Through this discursive process, I aim to begin to correct the ways in which the archive has become a "set of appearances… prised away from their meaning."

Figure 15 Central High School (Galveston, TX), The Bearcat '55, Front Cover and Frontispiece, 1955. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series III: Special Format Materials, 1900-1960; Subseries F: Manuscript Materials. Box 17, Folder 3. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

58 Berger, *About Looking*, 51. Emphasis mine.

Sifting through Palmer's archive, how might we begin to form memory contexts around each object? In the Ransom Center, we find a 1955 yearbook from Galveston's Central High School, inscribed "To J.E. Palmer, Compliments of L.A. Morgan" (Figure 15). Leon A. Morgan was the Principal of Central, Galveston's first Black high school, and the inscription leads me to believe that Palmer contributed uncredited photographs to "The Bearcat '55" yearbook.[59] The yearbook contains the expected suite of high school photos: student headshots, senior superlatives, club members in rows for group portraits, and sports teams frozen in mid-game action. Because Palmer is uncredited, it is not possible to determine which photos he may have taken, yet the book's inscription and its survival in the archive lead me to believe this was a memento worth keeping.

Central High School has long been an important institution in Galveston's African American community. In 1955, Central moved into its brand-new building, which was met with much fanfare among Galveston's Black residents. Even after Texas' public schools were forcibly integrated and Central was closed in 1968, its building was reborn in 1974 as the Old Cultural Center. The former school now serves as an event space for the city's Black fraternal and Greek organizations, as well as an archive of Galveston's African American history from Juneteenth onwards.[60] I toured the building with George "Pete"

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59 Palmer's archive contains two photographs of Black high school football teams, dated October 19, 1945 and January 6, 1947. The athletes' uniforms are unlabeled, yet a student wears a "C" letter jacket in the 1947 image, leading me to believe it is also Central High School. These two images support the possibility that Palmer contributed photographs to a later yearbook.

60 Juneteenth, or June 19th, celebrates the announcement of the abolition of slavery in Texas. Although slavery was legally abolished with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the news was not formally declared in Texas until months after the end of the Civil War in 1865. Pete Henley told me that the news was delayed so that slaves would continue to harvest cotton through the picking season. Juneteenth continues to be a major annual holiday for Galveston's African American community. At the Ashton Villa (along Broadway Avenue, Galveston's main road), a man dresses up as Union General Gordon Granger and stands on the balcony to read his official decree which freed enslaved Texans. The re-enactment is followed by a public brunch and party in the Villa, and many other social events scheduled throughout the day.

Henley, Board Chair of the Center, who showed me several rooms packed with books, trophies, artworks, and mountains of memorabilia relating to the city, high school, and famous Black Galvestonians (most notably, the boxer Jack Johnson) (Figure 16).[61] One room at Central formerly served as the Colored Branch of Galveston's Rosenberg Library. The school's alma mater, written by Dr. Leon Morgan, is printed on the wall. Central High School is a memory hub for Black Galvestonians to collect and preserve their past. It is a living archive whose collection is donated and maintained by community volunteers like Pete. Many living Galvestonians went to some years of school in this building. While I was visiting, one woman setting up for a banquet told me that she went to 5th and 6th grades there. Currently the Old Cultural Center is open by appointment only, yet Pete has applied for a $500,000 grant to remodel the building and make it publicly accessible.

Figure 16 Display cases at Central High School, Galveston, Texas. Author's photographs, taken October 19, 2017.

Galveston has been home to a sizable African American community since the nineteenth century, even counting a number of "free Negro" residents before Emancipation.[62] Its Black population solidified in the Reconstruction Era, when a group of

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61 The town has dozens of memorials to Johnson, including a public park attached to the Old Cultural Center.

62 On April 30, 1958, Andrew Forest Muir gave a speech titled "The Free Negro in Galveston County, Texas" for the Negro Business and Professional Men's Club of Houston. Reprinted in *The Negro History Bulletin* later that year, this text outlines the history of free Negro men and women who lived in Galveston before the outbreak of the Civil War. As a Black scholar, Muir provides an important amount of nuance in

four freed Black cowboys received a tract of ranch land from their former enslaver. The men called their community "Our Settlement." This label has persisted, and "The Settlement" is often used to describe Galveston's historic African American neighborhoods. The port of Galveston has a rich yet tumultuous history as a major Gulf trading post. In the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, it was known as the "Wall Street" of Texas. Moody Industries controlled the shipping and import industries (trading mostly cotton), and many Galvestonians were employed on the waterfront. A 1900 hurricane completely leveled the island, but the majority of the city was rebuilt and restored as a commercial hub. Local import and export businesses thrived, and Galveston became known as the Gulf's "Sin City." The island was home to dozens of casinos, music halls, and nightclubs. Pete recounted to me that Galvestonians fondly remember the lost pleasure industry: "folks didn't care because it gave them enough money to open their own businesses, like dry cleaners, banks, and all sorts." In a time of legal segregation and limited job opportunities, Black Galvestonians were able to profit from these unregulated businesses. The state became aware of this unsanctioned market (and untaxable revenues) and soon began a targeted crackdown. In 1957, the state's attorney general ordered the Texas Rangers to commence a series of destructive, high-profile raids on Galveston's gambling and entertainment businesses. These raids dealt a near-fatal blow to the tourism industry, and the city's economy began to slow.

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the short text, distinguishing between "freed" and "free" Negroes, the unique economic situation of Galveston's port and wharfing industry, and the cultural and lingual variety of the city in the 19th century. Most importantly, he speaks about the problems of relying on census data to accurately count free Negroes in Galveston; he writes of the rapid decline in free Negroes between 1850 and 1860: "As a matter of fact, while these figures do not lie, there is good reason to believe that liars surely did figure." He speaks of the social, economic, and legal factures that encouraged the Black community's distrust for census takers, and argues more broadly of the census' inability to present a totalizing picture of Galveston's free Negro population. Given during Palmer's lifetime, this speech is an important key to understanding how Black scholars viewed "the archive" (as it is present in governmental forms) as an insufficient document of Black history in Galveston.

Despite this recession and ongoing, frequent hurricanes, Galveston remains home to a sizable and tight-knit African American community. Juneteenth continues to be a major annual celebration, and the city contains dozens of historical markers for important African American monuments. Older shotgun style and Victorian homes are nestled between contemporary developments, creating a patchwork of historical and modern architecture throughout the city. The island also retains more than a dozen Black churches, several dating from the nineteenth century.[63]

Galveston's African American landmarks, flagged by their official Texas Historical Commission plaques, are largely located away from city's downtown area. Pete remarked that the downtown shops cater to day trippers disembarking from cruise ships, and he disdainfully explained that they peddle tourist essentials like shot glasses, tacky t-shirts, and overpriced margaritas. Similarly, Pete said that Black Galvestonians do not visit the historic Pleasure Pier and waterfront, formerly known as the Seawall. During its heyday, the Seawall and Gulf beaches were extremely popular with white locals and tourists seeking an escape from the year-round heat. Only one block (less than a quarter mile) of the ten-mile-long Seawall was available for "Colored" swimming from 1904 to 1963.

While the Seawall, Pleasure Pier, and downtown are Galveston's best-known tourist attractions, Texas Historical Commission plaques notify passerby of significant historic places throughout the city. One such landmark is the Rosewood Cemetery, which was founded in 1911 as the first county cemetery for African Americans on the island (Figure 17). The Rosewood Cemetery Association was founded by a coalition of Black

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63 My tour with Pete focused mainly on the island's churches, evidencing their continuing importance as religious and social spaces. Pete showed me church where he got married, although he said the "true blessing" was being able to divorce her 12 years later. For a list of Galveston's historic Black churches (and brief histories of each), see "Galveston's African American Historic Places & Pioneers: A Guidebook," produced by the Old Cultural Center and Galveston Historical Foundation's African American Heritage Committee (Galveston Historical Foundation, 2015).

churches, community groups, and wealthy individuals who united to buy a former slave burial ground. The cemetery was unmarked and had been neglected for decades, and the Association stepped in to preserve the site from further destruction. 411 individuals were buried in the cemetery from 1911 to 1944, although the majority of names have been lost. Only a fraction of the cemetery is intact: in 2018, less than an acre of the original eight-acre parcel remains undisturbed. It is a postage stamp of green grass surrounded by budget hotels.[64]

Figure 17 Rosewood Cemetery, Galveston, Texas. Author's photograph, October 19, 2017.

When I asked Pete about Galveston's numerous Historical Commission plaques (such as the one visible in this image) he noted that this has been a growing trend. In the past decade, Black residents have made a concerted effort to secure preservation status for local buildings. As of this writing, Galveston County has 458 Texas Historical Commission sites. This number pays testament to the work of local Galvestonians to celebrate and preserve African American landmarks. Each Texas Historical Commission plaque signifies a landmark to interested tourists, but its brief paragraph of text cannot tell a site's

64 The Rosewood Cemetery has a tumultuous history, as the land has changed hands several times since the last recorded burial in 1944. On September 7, 1945, one of the Rosewood Cemetery Association shareholders sold 19 shares to Thomas Armstrong. In 1957, Armstrong purchased the remaining shares of the Rosewood Association. Upon Armstrong's death, his estate sold the property to developers John and Judy Saracco, the person who has now donated the cemetery to the Galveston Historical Foundation. The massive hotels surrounding the Rosewood Cemetery undoubtedly disturbed many graves during their building processes, when the Cemetery land was unprotected and in the hands of hotel developers. "Rosewood Cemetery | Galveston Historical Foundation." Accessed February 16, 2018. http://www.galvestonhistory.org/attractions/cultural-heritage/rosewood-cemetery.

palimpsest history.[65] Thus, I would argue that like a portrait, a historic plaque is most fully activated by community members with memory context of the person or thing being commemorated. For example, at each plaque's dedication ceremony, residents will throw a party to celebrate the installation. Community members use shared "collective memory and social frameworks for memory" (to use a term coined by Maurice Halbwachs) to create meaning around objects, spaces, rituals, or events.[66] Experienced firsthand or inherited from previous generations, memory context imbues Galveston's historic sites with multiple, deeper layers of meaning.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot claims that communities or "collectives" write their own histories by choosing to remember the past. Past events are re-interpreted and carried into the present in order to shape a collective's identity. He writes, "The collective subjects who remember did not exist as such at the time of the events they claim to remember. Rather, their constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past. As such, they do not succeed such a past: they are its contemporaries."[67] Through the act of remembering – erecting a Texas Historical Society plaque – Black Galvestonians write and rewrite community histories onto the urban landscape. Inscribing their past in the Old Cultural Center and on plaques, Black Galvestonians simultaneously construct collective memory and exercise ownership over their city.

Pete and I spent a warm November afternoon driving up and down Galveston in his black GMC. With R&B as our soundtrack, we crisscrossed Broadway (the city's main

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65 Palmer's Studio is one such palimpsest. In addition to being home to his Studio, Palmer's house also served as a boarding establishment. At his Studio on Market Street, Palmer also rented out space to The Standard Beauty Salon.

66 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

67 Michel-Rolph Trouillot,.*Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 16.

thoroughfare) while Pete narrated the city's Black History through churches, homes, schools, parks, and landmarks. We pulled over a half-dozen times for Pete to exchange hellos and jokes with friends. My drive with Pete mirrored De Certeau's concept of the "tour," which is the "travel story: stories of journeys and actions" taken by everyday people in the city. As opposed to a "map" that prescribes and regulates a city, a tour gives form to a person's experiences or "narrative actions."[68] Returning to Palmer's archive, how do his photographs of Galveston express his tour, or everyday "stories of journeys and actions?"

Figure 18 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Places of Business. Box 16, Folder 2. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

One of Palmer's stamped photographs pictures the checkout area of a bustling grocery store (Figure 18). Closest to us, we see a young Black man pushing a handcart of wooden boxes, perhaps restocking goods or clearing out old inventory. Like the other

68 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 116.

employees in the store, he wears a white short-sleeved button-down shirt, a black bowtie, and black slacks. Immediately behind him, we see a trio of white customers waiting to check out: a young woman holding a pocketbook, a tall man with eyeglasses, and a priest wearing a clerical collar and flat-topped hat. The young woman looks directly into Palmer's camera with a curious yet calm gaze. Behind her, we see several additional checkout lanes, all packed with customers and busy staff. The scene recalls a typical day at the grocery store: humming with energy, yet mundane in its bustle.

The store employs and serves both white and Black Galvestonians, which is surprising at first blush. We can distinguish the employee-patron divide according to individuals' clothing: the staff wear matching uniforms while customers sport casual outfits, such as shirtsleeves and sundresses. Given that Palmer passed away before the Civil Rights Act, this photograph was certainly taken before integration was mandated. How can we explain this integrated Texan grocery store? While the South was legally segregated through the mid-twentieth century, public spaces could be more racially mixed than historical legislation demanded. A large number of circumstances encouraged this flexibility. For one, businesses and public spaces were generally not guarded by officers; it was up to business owners to choose whether to police segregated spaces. They could serve a wider customer base — and turn a larger profit — by choosing not to enforce segregation. Aside from economic motivations, a business owner might ignore these laws for other reasons: they might morally disagree with segregation, or not have the staff resources to police each entryway.

Palmer's photo serves as evidence for the inconsistent enforcement of segregation in the South before the Civil Rights Act. His image thus challenges historical narratives which posit the South as unflinchingly segregated. This photographic document encourages us to consider "the varied ways in which postwar photographic representations

of race collided and colluded with the broader social systems in which they were produced and received."[69] De Certeau explores the disjunction between prescribed uses of the city and its actual functions. He writes that a planned and orderly city is a "place" created by a ruling body to serve specific purposes for a specific population. A place is defined by systems – like maps and laws – put forth by a government. Yet in everyday life, a place always becomes a "space:" traversed, used, and altered by a multitude of persons. The grocery store becomes an integrated environment through the everyday people who patronize it.[70]

Palmer's informal photographs present his narrative of Galveston. "Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces. The forms of this play are numberless... like a camera panning over a scene, [it] moves over the panorama."[71] Moving "over the panorama" of Galveston, Palmer's candid images capture a city that is vastly more textured and nuanced than traditional or write-written historical accounts might lead us to believe. As a booming port city, Galveston was home to many integrated businesses in the first half of the twentieth century.[72] It is the very mundane nature of the grocery store's integration which makes Palmer's image so surprising: the woman's calm eye contact shows us that Black patrons were a quotidian presence in this store. Thus Palmer's both challenge existing histories of Jim Crow segregation and paint a more nuanced picture of daily life in Galveston, in which Black and white citizens shopped and worked side by side.

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69 Duganne, *The Self in Black and White*, 7.

70 "In short, space is a practiced place. Thus the street [o place] geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers." De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 117.

71 Ibid, 118.

72 For more on the integrated labor history of Galveston, see Clifford Farrington, *Biracial Unions on Galveston's Waterfront, 1865-1925*. Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2007.

Figure 19 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries B: Personal Events; Funerals. Box 6, Folder 16. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Palmer also captured hardships he witnessed around Galveston, such as hurricanes and funerals. These "disaster images" (as I call them) make up more than half of the signed "Palmer's Studio" photographs in the Ransom Center. Why did he sign these disaster images? Did he make multiple copies for his own records, or did he begin stamping his photos consistently at a certain date? Did he send these to newspapers or magazines, hoping to have them printed?[73] While I have not answered these questions, it is important to consider how Palmer's disaster images also visualize complex personhood.

One of Palmer's stamped photographs depicts a group of pallbearers exiting a funeral home in mid-stride, about to place a wreathed casket in a hearse (Figure 19). Two tall men carry the casket's front handles and their shorter companions hold the rear. The men wear dark suits and have their heads tipped downward, acknowledging the solemnity of their task. The light wood casket is covered in greenery and ribbons, likely to be placed

[73]Does the fact that they were in Cleo's possession mean that the photos were rejected? I've been unable to locate any record of his images being published in news outlets, yet Galveston's white and Black newspaper archives are not digitized or easily searchable. There is more digging to be done in this regard, yet this research exceeds the scope of my current project.

at the graveside during the burial. This funeral home looks to be nestled in a residential neighborhood and is surrounded by comparable wood-shingled houses. In the distance, we see the top of a sign planted in the front yard, with the words "McCoy &" just visible above the casket's flora. We do not know if the deceased's family hired Palmer to photograph this scene. Perhaps Palmer was simply a guest at this funeral, camera in tow, and captured this scene for its somber beauty. As a professional photographer who came into contact with most of Galveston's Black community, he likely knew the deceased, or heard of their passing from family or friends. However this photograph came into existence, its "Palmer's Studio" stamp archive reiterates Palmer's commitment to capturing moments of sadness. If Palmer had created solely uplifting and aspirational images, his archive would have an entirely different purpose. His disaster images testify to the ubiquity of tragedies, both large and small, in the daily lives of Black Galvestonians.

Leigh Raiford coined the term "critical Black memory" to describe both the accomplishments and hardships experienced by African American communities. She argues that there is no Black history – national or local – that does not embrace retelling stories of sadness and joy simultaneously. She writes, "Critical Black memory emerges out of and is motivated by both survival – the continued ability to struggle and the faith that such struggle will secure a brighter future – and failure – the persistence of peril and renewed forms of racial inequity and subjugation."[74] Acknowledging struggles and failures allow Black subjects to mourn past tragedies while striving to "secure a brighter future." Photography is a fundamental means for documenting struggle. A photograph creates a concrete, shareable visual memory that allows individuals and communities to move forward from tragedy while remembering its effects. Perhaps such funeral photographs

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[74] Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 120.

were especially poignant for Palmer, who personally experienced the early passing of a loved one. When Carry perished in a car accident in Galveston, she and John had been married for only nine years.[75] Even without the context of this personal anecdote, Palmer's photograph demonstrates a commitment to documenting funerals and capturing mourners' collective grief.

Figure 20 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Hurricane Damage. Box 17, Folder 5. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

To further evidence this interest in visualizing tragedy as well as joy, we can turn to Palmer's photographs of hurricane damage. In the Ransom Center archive, we find eighteen stamped photos that document the wreckage and destruction wrought by hurricanes in Galveston (Figures 20-24). The photographs are undated, and Galveston experienced several major hurricanes during Palmer's lifetime, so it is not possible to connect these images with one or several specific storms.[76] Yet it is important to note that these images make up nearly half the stamped photos in Palmer's archive. Hurricanes have long held special mnemonic weight in the diasporic Black

[75] Carry's death certificate curiously notes her husband as "Prof J.E. Palmer;" this is the only document that uses this prefix to describe Palmer.

[76] According to national weather databases, Galveston experienced nine hurricanes between 1916 and 1964. The most likely dates for these photographs would be July 1934 (storm surge of 5.9 feet), July 1943 (storm surge of 4 feet, nineteen killed), or July 1959 (Hurricane Debra, 14 inches of rain). "Galveston, Texas Hurricanes." Accessed February 8, 2018. http://www.hurricanecity.com/city/galveston.htm.

consciousness, yet why else did Palmer take such interest in covering these storms?[77] What purpose did these images serve, and how can we analyze their discursive function today?

Perhaps it would help to return to Palmer's photograph of the white colored house, discussed at the start of this chapter (Figure 14). While we don't know why he took this photograph, the gesture testifies to the longstanding importance of home ownership in America. Home ownership has been considered an apex accomplishment for citizens, and one's home embodies both financial and emotional measures of personal success. Whether one rents or owns their home, a residence is also crucial to fashioning a self-image. A clean and cheerful domestic space projects a person or family's financial, familial, and social accomplishments. Home ownership was doubly challenging for African American citizens in the early through mid-twentieth century. In addition to being corralled into segregated neighborhoods, Black residents faced extreme discrimination when applying for mortgages or loans from local banks.[78] Despite these roadblocks, Black Galvestonians still strove toward home ownership. Palmer's photograph of the house gives concrete form to such aspirations: the photographic object becomes a tangible form of a memory. It freezes this

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[77] A discussion of African American and Black Caribbean communities and hurricanes is beyond the scope of this paper, yet it is important to note that such events far exceed the label of "natural disasters." In 2005, Hurricane Katrina decimated most of New Orlean's African American neighborhoods, and many scholars have analyzed the economic, social, psychological, and political repercussions of this storm. David Dante Troutt's edited volume *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (New York: The New Press, 2006) includes several essays which explore the connection between African American communities and hurricanes. Many of these authors' arguments and conclusions could be easily applied to a deeper discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century hurricanes (like Ike) in Galveston.

[78] For a highly detailed quantitative review of home ownership and mortgages among African Americans, the National Bureau of Economic Research produced an in-depth working paper. Collins, William J., and Robert A. Margo. "Race and Home Ownership, 1900 to 1990." Working Paper. National Bureau of Economic Research, August 1999. https://doi.org/10.3386/w7277.

For an analysis of aspirational home ownership among African Americans from the 1940s-1980s, see Román, Elda Maria. "Mortgaged Status: Literary Representations of Black Home Ownership and Social Mobility." *Contemporary Literature* 55, no. 4 (December 21, 2014): 726–59. https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2014.0032.

house at a moment in time – at the peak of its beauty – and the photograph-as-memory preserves this emotion even if the residence is sold or lost.

In the Gulf city of Galveston, hurricanes have been a near-constant threat to homes and property. Hurricanes hammer the island with brutal winds and floods, and have often brought devastating wreckage. During one or many particularly wrathful storms, Palmer documented the resulting damage around Galveston. Many of Palmer's hurricane photographs focus on Galveston's main downtown area, which was segregated at the time and meant to be inaccessible to Black residents. Yet in the aftermath of a hurricane, "normal" protocols would have been suspended: businesses were shuttered, residents were encouraged to remain indoors, and law enforcement would be at a minimum. Only a few curious individuals would dare to brave the flooding, and perhaps this unusual quiet allowed Palmer to photograph the downtown unrestricted by segregation. Considering De Certeau's description of tactics and strategies, we might see Palmer's downtown storm photographs as such a maneuver. De Certeau writes that the tactic "must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them."[79]

Figure 21 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Hurricane Damage. Box 17, Folder 5. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

79 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 37.

Several of Palmer's photographs were taken out of upper-floor windows in downtown buildings, giving him a birds-eye view over the flooded city streets. Such photographs might represent Palmer making use of "the cracks that… open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers."

Palmer captures such "surprises" on the faces of men he photographed during the floods. Two images, taken from an upper-floor window, show groups of white men wading through knee-deep floodwater downtown. In the first photograph, four men wear thin white shirts and pants that cling to their bodies (Figure 22). Walking away from the window where Palmer is stationed, each man looks off into a different direction, examining the lake of water that surrounds them. In the next photograph, found directly adjacent in the archive, Palmer has zoomed in on three different white men (Figure 21). Two of them turn over shoulders to look up at Palmer. The men look bemused to see a photographer studying them from above; perhaps they are surprised to encounter anyone else who dared to explore the floods. Further still, are they surprised to see a Black photographer observing their adventure? All seven men look oddly cheerful in their expedition, and Palmer captures their giddy smiles. Palmer and these men are intrepid urban explorers who take advantage of the city's eerie quiet. Their adventures can be seen an act of transgression, as all men ignore advice from

Figure 22 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Hurricane Damage. Box 17, Folder 5. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

city officials to stay indoors. Yet Palmer and these white men are undeterred, finding the hurricane an opportune moment to observe their city transformed. As a Black Galvestonian, Palmer gains even more from being "in the break" of this hurricane: the storm allows him to explore a space normally restricted to white residents.[80] Furthermore, Palmer becomes temporarily panoptic from his literally elevated viewpoint on the second floor. "The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins."[81] While the hurricane brings tragic damage, it also creates ephemeral breaks for Palmer to move through the city as surveyor instead of surveyed.

Figure 23 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Hurricane Damage. Box 17, Folder 6. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

In addition, Palmer photographed wreckage in residential neighborhoods to document lost personal property. These photographs have a disquieting stillness to them. Houses have been shredded like paper, their scraps laying in haphazard piles, and possessions are scattered throughout the streets. In one image, we see a white house that

80 I borrow "in the break" from Fred Moten's seminal text of the same name: *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

81 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

has been half-swept off its foundation. A warped, broken piano in the foreground leans in the same direction, creating a haunting parallel of losses both large and small (Figure 23). Another depicts a gas station whose sign has been partly torn off; only the word "AIR" remains visible, and the sign points into the sky like a limp flag (Figure 24). The marquee dangles precipitously from a handful of spokes, and pierces the roof below. These photographs are devoid of human life, yet Palmer's focus on material damage compels us to remember those whose homes, businesses, and belongings have been destroyed. By capturing this damage on film, Palmer both records and gives visual form to his community's grief. Walter Benjamin argues that creating photographs gives the photographer a feeling of control over their city, especially in the face of tragedy. By making images of our environments, we are able to record and give visual form to our experiences within it. Benjamin writes,

Figure 24 John Palmer, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Hurricane Damage. Box 17, Folder 7. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of

> a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.[82]

By Benjamin's definition, Palmer's photographs represent a sense of ownership over our world's indomitable tragedies, "in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris." Photography is a tool that gives us power to "calmly and adventurously go traveling" in our environments, writing meaningful narratives out of the everyday or distressing events unfolding us. By creating images, the photographer gives form to his or her unique vision of their world, and they transform their city into vessels of personal expression.

These photographs act as a record of Palmer's "tours" through his city, but also speak to the longstanding history of hurricanes impacting the life cycles and memories of Galvestonians. Since Galveston's apocalyptic 1900 hurricane, which leveled the island, the city has been regularly plagued by storms and floods. Hurricane Ike in 2008 was incredibly destructive, and led to a massive rebuilding project in the city. On our tour of Galveston, Pete recounted that all the low-income housing or "projects" (previously located near the shipping ports) were torn down after Ike, and single-family homes were built in their place. These state-subsidized houses encouraged home ownership among residents who previously rented apartments in the large "project" apartments. The charming new homes feature porches, front yards, and garages snuggled on cul-de-sac streets. Pete approved of the new developments, noting that while hurricanes produce tragic devastation, the subsequent rebuilding transformed run-down apartment buildings into charming developments. Setting aside their visual appeal, the single-family homes offer housing to a much smaller number of residents. When I asked Pete if this presented a problem, he noted that the population of Galveston fell drastically after Ike. Some residents whose

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[82] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," (1935). Edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-251.

homes were destroyed elected to move elsewhere, especially since the city and insurance companies mandated strict regulations for rebuilding homes (such as rebuilding homes on top of platforms). Pete pointed out the large number of empty lots around the island where homes once stood. Today, these look like pleasant green plots to the unfamiliar visitor like myself, but to Pete, they are a reminder of Galvestonians who are now gone.[83]

We do not know if Palmer lost property or possessions in hurricanes, yet a 1937 article from the *Galveston Daily News* recounted a fire in his studio:

> Fire of unknown origin caused damage of more than $500 about 5:20 pm yesterday in Palmer's Studio, 2521 D. The blaze started in the dark room, back of the studio. Fireman confined the flames to the one room, although slight damage was caused by smoke and water. They extinguished the fire in less than half an hour. J.E. Palmer, owner of the studio, turned in the alarm after he noticed flames coming through the door of the darkroom. No one was in the darkroom at the time, Palmer said, and he could not explain how the fire started. No other part of the two-story frame building, for which Charles Keller is agent, was damaged.[84]

$500 in damages would total about $8,500 in 2018. Palmer undoubtedly lost a great deal of expensive printing and darkroom equipment, such as chemicals, paper, and enlarging tools. He also likely had to close his studio for repairs, and this lost business would have incurred further costs. Yet this $500 only accounts for a fragment of the total damage: what about those things that we cannot quantify in dollars? Did Palmer lose negatives or printed photographs? Did he have a personal archive – his own private photographs, or business records – lost in the blaze? While I do not have these answers, I include this story to note that Palmer suffered a major loss of property midway through his career. Still, we cannot

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[83] In our tour, Pete spent a great deal of time remarking on the growth of the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston. UTMB has been in Galveston since 1891, but Pete was distressed by their recent rate of expansion. The organization uses eminent domain laws to buy up land very cheaply, and often buy up plots where houses had been destroyed by hurricanes. Pete disparaged UTMB for taking advantage of folks who needed to sell their land after losing their home. UTMB can offer very little money to property owners, to then invade and demolish historic neighborhoods.

[84] *Galveston Daily News*, August 17, 1937. Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

know if this fire had a longstanding impact on Palmer or motivated his "disaster images." I include this anecdote in the same way that we might slip a tinted lens over a camera: its presence colors how we analyze Palmer's images. "It seems to me that if the art historian can decode a work of art as a cultural text, she can do the same with the life of the artist; and the results often shed light on one another. The artist's way of being in the world often helps us see something in the art work that we might otherwise miss."[85]

John Palmer's informal photographs visualize complex personhood and the everyday lived experiences of Galveston's Black community. Unlike his studio portraits, which intentionally depict beauty and pride in his sitters, Palmer's documentary photographs capture both positive and negative events in Galveston. Such images add vital depth to his archive, in that his photographs of "complex personhood" aim to capture the full scope of everyday life. Studying Palmer's photographic archive demands that we consider his formal and candid photographs equally, discussing what discursive functions each image may have served. This provides many possible paths for future research, and thus the goal of my project is not to create succinct summaries or tidy histories. I have only begun to explore the power and functions of photography in Galveston's Black community, yet my project also aims to be an intervention into how art historians analyze and discuss archival photographs.

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85 Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity*, 1915-1935 (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999), xx. Emphasis mine.

Chapter Three: A Network of Black Photographers

Ever since photographic technology arrived on U.S. soil, African Americans have been present on both sides of the camera. Yet Black photographers have occupied a very minimal portion of art history, as white scholars have tended to focus on images of instead of by Black subjects. Deborah Willis has spearheaded efforts to correct this imbalance, writing numerous and wide-ranging volumes about African American photographers working in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the Second Reconstruction of the 1970s, there has been a concerted effort to recover and publish Black photographic archives and to place them within the history of American photography.[86] As the individuals in this chapter demonstrate, African American photographers were working throughout the United States as documentarians, journalists, artists, and studio photographers. Willis writes that these Black photographers "played a crucial role in examining and reinterpreting the dreams and ideals of both the Black intelligentsia and the working class by making socially relevant and class-conscious images of the African American community… Not only aesthetically significant, these images do what only the finest photography can achieve: they create a new awareness or historical consciousness that has the power to rewrite history itself."[87]

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[86] I first encountered the term "Second Reconstruction" in Peter Wood's 1978 state-of-the-field essay on Black Studies, yet historian C. Vann Woodward coined the term in 1957. Writing in the earliest stages of the Civil Rights movement, Woodward described the Second Reconstruction as "the present struggle for Negro rights." Today, the Second Reconstruction refers to the period of 1960 to 1976 as an era of grassroots and Black-led political, civic, and intellectual activism. In the academic sphere, African American studies boomed in popularity and productivity during these years. Peter Wood, "'I Did the Best I Could for My Day': The Study of Early Black History during the Second Reconstruction, 1960 to 1976," *The William & Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1978): 185–225. C. Vann Woodward, "The Political Legacy of Reconstruction," *The Journal of Negro Education* 26, no. 3 (1957): 231-40. doi:10.2307/2293405.

[87] Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 47-48.

This chapter links Palmer with a selection of African American photographers and portrait studios to present additional contexts in which to analyze his practice. I have chosen to discuss a small handful of peers, yet it is crucial to note that many of these men and women have been forgotten, erased, or obscured over a relatively short period of time. Countless photographers have yet to be rediscovered or written about, and as such, the currently-known group of African American photographers only represents the metaphorical tip of the iceberg.[88] First, I will discuss Black photographers in Texas and the American South who were active during Palmer's lifetime. These photographers' varied practices were simultaneously overlapping and unique; their goals, business structures, and customer bases differed according to the each photographer's geographic context, temporal moment, political sentiments, and artistic vision. While their bodies of work might look similar, we must also attend to the slightest of differences in order to gain a more finely textured understanding of photography's multiple discursive functions. In an effort to discuss Palmer beyond his geographically peers, I will also present an imaginative network, linking Palmer to photographers working in other eras and locations. This framing aims to be intellectually generative, so that we might analyze Palmer's work on different conceptual planes. Woven together, the photographers discussed in this chapter create a tapestry of interrelated personal and professional networks, and provide insights into the many functions of photography for Black subjects and creators.

Alan Govenar's *Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas* stands as a crucial intervention into the history of photography. Collating images and recollections from photographers working around Texas' major cities, "the

[88] Palmer's archive contains dozens of photographs bearing signatures of other studios, from Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, and beyond. Most of these photographers have not been studied, and online and library searches do not yield additional information about these studios. Perhaps their archives no longer exist, or they have not yet become known to scholars. The one exception is the photograph from "The Teal" studio in Houston, which I will discuss below.

autobiographical texts interweave with the photographs to reveal the matrix of community life."[89] Govenar's regionally-structured format also allows the author to sketch out local webs of influence, mentorship, and competition among neighboring photographers. These reconstructed professional networks provide a vibrant framework in which to analyze photographers' businesses and images. Govenar writes that while these photographers' careers and lives defy generalization, "They shared a common vision of the importance of photography in African American community life that was articulated in the images they created for Black newspapers, school yearbooks, and other local publications."[90]

Govenar's text strongly emphasizes the importance of positive photographs in Black communities to visualize "dignity and self-esteem." He continues, "To have such a portrait made was indicative of social status and of success in spite of the adversities of segregation and racism."[91] The author claims that African American photographers intentionally focused less on documenting struggles and hardships. This assertion is supported by these photographers' archives, which contain predominately portraits and positive images. Yet wasn't this predominately shaped by professional necessity? Portraits and commissions provided steady incomes for photographers. Documentary, artistic, or journalistic images were riskier in terms of public reception and potential profit. Might this feedback loop have discouraged photographers from taking risks, more than their supposed desires to make only positive images?

Certainly, professional photographers needed to conform to tried-and-true portrait styles. Although they were beholden to their sitters' tastes and expectations, we still must present photographers as creators with unique visions and who made innovative aesthetic

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[89] Alan B. Govenar, *Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas*. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 3.
90 Ibid, 2.
91 Ibid, 15.

choices when possible. Reaffirming their artistry and complex personhood allows us to dig deeper into their multivalent and flexible bodies of work, such as Palmer's coexisting portraits and disaster images. To reconcile photographers' opposing drives – visualizing both hope and tragedy – perhaps we can unite Govenar's optimism with Hershini Bhana Young's description of the "injured" Black body: "This body, overburdened by the discourses of race and representation that created its Blackness in the first place, can only survive by acts of (aesthetic) identification that create community."[92] Govenar's book title reiterates the truth that a community provided the foundation and financial support for a photographer's practice. Thus, conforming to norms of portraiture might qualify as Young's "acts of (aesthetic) identification." Palmer photographs Galvestonians in a positive light (in attractive, aspirational portraits) and as "injured" (in his disaster images), and these seemingly discordant images are unified by their attachment to his community. While this chapter recognizes these photographers' visual similarities or "acts of (aesthetic) identification," we must also attend to these photographers' differing business strategies, nuanced portraits, and their choices concerning who and what to photograph.

[92] Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body*. Reencounters with Colonialism--New Perspectives on the Americas (Hanover, N.H. : Dartmouth College Press: Published by University Press of New England, 2006), 6.

Figure 25 A.C. & Elnora Teal, untitled. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series III: Special Format Materials; Subseries D: Paper Mat Prints; Other Studios. Box 19, Folder 12. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Portraits of Community contains a chapter on "The Teal" studio, which was just north of Palmer in Galveston. Palmer's archive at the Ransom Center contains one portrait photograph labeled "The Teal, Houston, Texas" (Figure 25). The image depicts a woman in profile and angled toward the photographer. Her dark silk dress is patterned with golden starburst shapes, and her short hair is curled flat around her forehead. Assessing the woman's fashions and hairstyle, I would date this photograph to the 1920s or 1930s. Arthur Chester (A.C.) and Elnora Teal worked in Houston for over four decades. Elnora was one of only 100 women photographers of color in the 1920 US census. Like Palmer, the husband and wife team opened their studio after World War I. "The Teal" had a reputation for excellence, and was known for their delicate retouching and cutting-edge photographic equipment. Their photographs depict a cross-section of the city's middle-class African American community, ranging from individual portraits to fraternal societies. As Houston's population boomed, the duo opened a second studio (which Elnora oversaw) and founded Teal's School of Photography in 1942. The school trained dozens of Black photographers as part of the Houston Colored Junior College,

which later became the Houston College for Negroes.[93] After A.C.'s death in 1955, Elnora oversaw both studios as well as Teal's School. Bernadette Pruitt claims, "Many, if not most of the thousands of photographs in the African American-oriented manuscripts throughout Houston – photographic and oral history collections in various Houston area archives – were Teal portraits."[94] From the Teal's prolific output and close proximity to Galveston, it is not surprising that we find a Teal portrait in Palmer's archive. We do not know the nature of these photographers' relationship or collaborations (if there were any), yet the Teal portrait in Palmer's archive evidences a cross-city professional network of African American photographers in Texas.

R.C. Hickman was also active in Texas, yet his practice focused on photojournalism rather than studio portraiture (Figure 26). After returning from the military in 1946, he began working as a darkroom technician, then studied at the Southwestern School of Photography. His career began with an unpaid internship for the *Dallas Express* – a Black newspaper established in 1892 and still in operation – and then joined the *Dallas Star Post* as a staff photographer. Throughout the 1950s, Hickman documented Dallas's vibrant Black community and arts scene, even photographing stars like Nat King Cole (Figure 27).

Figure 26 R.C. Hickman, *Self-Portrait in Studio*. R. C. Hickman Photographic Archive, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

[93] Govenar, *Portraits of Community*, 20.
[94] Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 211.

Figure 27 R.C. Hickman, *Nat King Cole*, 1954. R. C. Hickman Photographic Archive (DI00354), The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

Like Palmer, Hickman also photographed people at parties and concerts, charming potential clients by saying "My pictures will last as long as you do."[95] Hickman was also a keen businessman who sought to grow the circulation of Black publications. As part owner of *The Star Post,* he encouraged editors to include social columns, knowing that readers would buy newspapers that covered their neighborhood news.

Yet beyond his business savvy, Hickman's dedication to African American newspapers evidences his commitment to creating "an oppositional Black aesthetic."[96] Hickman recalled, "*The Star Post* knew that the white press was not going to cover our demonstrations and picketing for equal rights… We wanted to be sure that the Blacks knew what was going on. The only way they were going to really know it was to put it in our newspaper."[97] In 1949, he began providing images for national publications like *Jet, Ebony,* and the NAACP's *The Call*. Hickman documented local traumas endured by Black citizens, such as evictions and racially incited beatings (Figure 28). In 1956, he photographed white men and women burning effigies in Mansfield to protest the integration of a school. Some of Hickman's photographs were later used as evidence in a

[95] R.C. Hickman, *Behold the People: R. C. Hickman's Photographs of Black Dallas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1994),18.
[96] hooks, "In Our Glory," 56.
[97] Hickman, *Behold the People,* 21.

Figure 28 R.C. Hickman, *Melba Theater*, 1955. R. C. Hickman Photographic Archive (VN 85-43-000279a), The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

trial brought by the NAACP, which disputed the unequal facilities of segregated schools. He testified on the stand to confirm his images' accuracy. He reminisced, "We were [viewed as] second-class citizens and we had to prove we were not."[98] While Hickman's explicitly political subjects differ from Palmer's archive, both photographers made "disaster images" of the daily trials and tribulations of Black Texans. In this regard, we might link Palmer's hurricane images with Hickman's eviction photographs, as both photographers documented events when Black residents lost their homes and property.

Also working in a segregated Southern community, Richard Samuel Roberts operated a photography studio from his home in Columbia, South Carolina beginning in 1920 (Figure 29). His archive was brought to light in 1977, when an archivist (acting on a tip from Roberts' neighbor) uncovered over 3,000 glass plates in the crawl space under Roberts' home. Phillip Dunn and Thomas Johnson's book *A True Likeness: The Black South of Richard Samuel Roberts 1920-1936* brings together Roberts' biography, a history of Columbia's Black community, and the narrative of recovering, reprinting, and exhibiting

[98] Ibid, 14.

Roberts' photographs. Columbia, like Galveston, was a segregated city with a large Black middle class.[99] Roberts was a self-taught photographer and learned his trade through mail-in manuals and periodicals. He owned a home with a small back house that served as his portrait studio and darkroom. He was highly innovative, building artificial lighting cabinets and custom equipment to help him better capture numerous dark skin tones. This was a common technical challenge faced by Black photographers, given that photography was invented for and by white makers. In commercial and journalistic photographs, subjects with darker complexions often looked totally black, with very little gradation or shadows on their skin. Dunn and Johnson write, "While as a photographer he was himself an entrepreneur, principally he was an artist, a craftsman who cared about the beauty of the image, grace of form, balance and line, tone and contrast, the quality of light and shades of darkness."[100] Roberts' clients and children described him as a perfectionist with a warm and inviting personality. Like Palmer, Roberts' advertisements feature encouraging phrases like: "No other gift causes so much real and lasting joy to them as the gift of your photograph."[101]

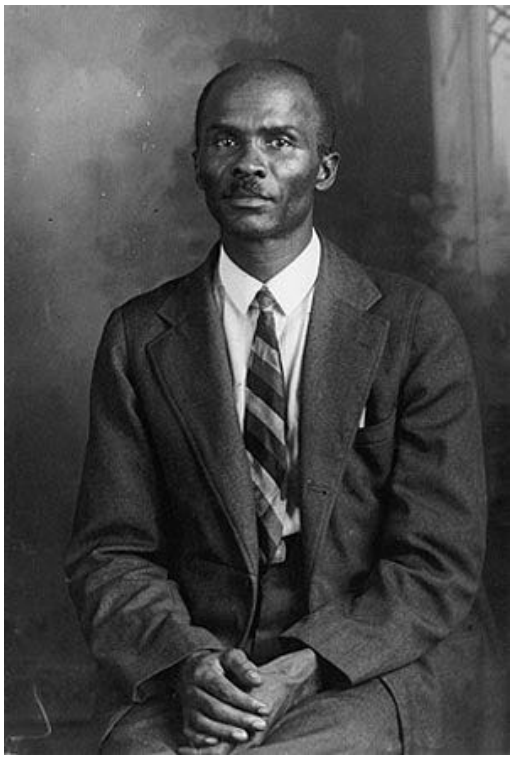

Figure 29 Richard Samuel Roberts, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1930s. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

[99] Richard Samuel Roberts, Thomas L. Johnson, and Phillip C. Dunn, *A True Likeness: The Photographs of Richard Samuel Roberts, 1920-1936* (Columbia, S.C. : Chapel Hill, N.C: B. Clark ; Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1986), 2.
[100] Ibid, 6.
[101] Ibid, 6.

Roberts' portraits and candid photographs depict every social stratum in the Black community. His images "reveal the other face of the Black community: that of the urban Negro of the 1920s and 1930s on the rise, going about the business of work and pleasure."[102] Yet Roberts was also interested in documenting the harsher sides of the Black southern experience, away from the more glamorous city center. He owned a car and often drove to the rural outskirts of Columbia, photographing nearby small towns and agricultural communities. Analyzing Roberts' archive as more than historical documents, Dunn and Johnson argue, "its power lies chiefly in its revelation."[103] The gravity of the word "revelation" is not misused here. Each microhistory of a photographer, their community, and their temporal moment presents a vital intervention into art historical discourses of twentieth-century photography.

African American publications and news services were vitally important to Black communities throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1910, W. E. B. Du Bois established *The Crisis*, the NAACP's monthly magazine, and he served as an editor and contributor until the 1930s. Claude Barnett founded the *Associated Negro Press* in 1919 to supply local and national Black newspapers with photographs and political, entertainment, and sports stories. Charles Spurgeon Johnson, the famed Chicago-based sociologist, founded *Opportunity* magazine in 1923 as the professional journal for the National Urban League. Seeking to provide an alternative to the white mainstream media, which predominately portrayed Black subjects in negative or inaccurate stories, these news services supplied Black newspapers with reliable and relevant stories about African American subjects and issues.[104] Black publications were key sources of information:

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[102] Ibid, 8.
[103] Ibid, 8.
[104] Lawrence D. Hogan, *A Black National News Service, The Associated Negro Press and Claude Barnett, 1919-1945* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1984).

readers could learn about national politics and news, as well as local elections, job opportunities, events, and even neighborhood goings-on. They filled Black readers' need for content that reflected and was meaningful to them.

The slim "Incoming Correspondence" folder in Palmer's archive contains a letter from Van Pell Evans, the publisher of *Negro Life Magazine*. Dated October 18, 1944, Evans wrote to "Bill Palmer, aka Mr. J.E. Palmer" about submitting photographs to his year-old magazine. He asked for Palmer's assistance in soliciting images and subscriptions, writing "I am very anxious to establish a large circulation of my magazine in your city and I am calling on you to assist me in getting a big circulation there." Based in Houston, the *Negro Life Publishing Company* marketed itself as "The Heart and Soul of the Negro." Trying to incite Palmer's interest, Evans wrote, "The magazine will be a great asset to your business since it is more of a pictorial magazine than anything that we have in the South. I would like to have you serve as the official photographer in your city and vicinity." In addition to being paid for his own photographs, Palmer could make money by selling advertisements and subscriptions to the magazine. He could earn a 25% commission for all deals secured, as well as a 10-cent profit on each magazine he sold personally.

It is perhaps fortunate that Palmer was out of town when Evans called on him, in that Evans' letter provides us with a record of this possible partnership. We do not know if Palmer wrote back or cooperated, yet Evans writes to the photographer with high hopes:

> It is my plan to publish a story about Galveston soon telling about its history, leading citizens, landmarks, and civic advantages also a story about the Elk lodge of which you are the state president. I need your support and the support of the Brother Bills of Galveston and the state of Texas. You may be assured that I will cooperate with you and your programs to the fullest of my ability, Expecting an early reply and your whole hearted co-operation, I am, Very sincerely yours, Van Pell Evans, Publisher.

Evans intended for *Negro Life Magazine* to unify Black communities around Texas. Evans understood the power of images, and wanted his "pictorial magazine" to inform Black Texans about their "history, leading citizens, landmarks, and civic advantages." These goals thus align with Palmer's Studio portraits, in that both aim to visualize Black progress and pride. The difference in Evans' project lies in its reach, in that he intended to circulate these images beyond their original communities in order to unify Black Texans.

Galveston has been home to numerous Black newspapers since the end of the Civil War. Dr. Melville C. Keith, a local surgeon and physician, founded the *Free Man's Press* in 1865. The October 24, 1868 issue includes several opinion pieces (such as encouraging voter registration, or condemning the racism of state institutions), as well as advertisements for Black-owned businesses, a column-length instruction manual on how to read and do multiplication, and prices for common goods (such as cotton, bread, and hay). The four-page paper mentions that Richard Nelson will soon open an educational institute for "colored children." Nelson went on to publish another Black newspaper, the *Galveston Spectator*, five years later. Operating from 1873 to 1885, the weekly *Spectator* had circulation was between 500 and 1,000. Both newspapers provide glimpses of Reconstruction-era life in Galveston, and also outline a network of the city's educated Black businessmen who sought to educate and employ Black Texans.[105] Moving ahead to the twentieth century, Palmer certainly was aware of the reach and impact of Black newspapers, given that he advertised regularly in the *Galveston Daily News*. We do not know if he collaborated with Van Pell Evans or contributed to *Negro Life Magazine*, yet

[105] *The Free Man's Press*, October 24, 1868. Vol 1, No. 14. Galveston, Texas. *African American Newspapers*, Series 1, 1827-1998. *America's Historical Newspapers*, an Archive of Americana® Collection. University of Texas at Austin. *The Galveston Spectator*, c. 1873-1885. Galveston, Texas. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Alwyn Barr, "Galveston Spectator," accessed April 22, 2017, http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/eeg08.

this correspondence helps us sketch out Palmer's professional networks. More broadly, Evans' letter helps us place Palmer within the history of African American media, and allows us to trace common themes in local and national news services.

Figure 30 Charles "Teenie" Harris, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1940s. Image courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Charles "Teenie" Harris was a Pittsburgh-based journalist and studio photographer active from the 1930s through 1970s (Figure 30). Harris has enjoyed considerable fame since the 1990s. In 2001, Deborah Willis, Cheryl Finley, Joe W. Trotter, and Laurence Glasco contributed to a richly illustrated and researched monograph about his work. The Carnegie Museum of Art now holds Harris' archive of over 30,000 photographs and negatives. Harris' has been the focus of several exhibitions, as well as a film by Kenneth Love titled "One Shot: The Life and Work of Teenie Harris." Like Palmer, Harris operated a portrait studio and lived in his city for over fifty years. He was committed to creating positive images, which Cheryl Finley calls an "aesthetics of aspiration." A Pittsburgh librarian described Harris' charming demeanor, recalling, "He made people feel special. No matter what happened in your life outside of the studio, the moment I was in the studio, I knew I

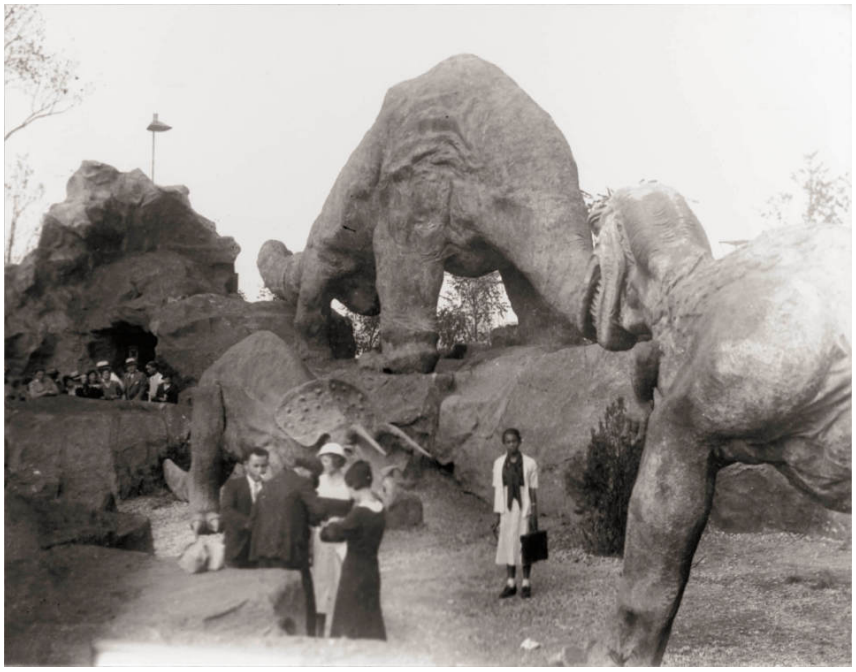

Figure 31 Charles "Teenie" Harris, Visitors at the Sinclair Oil Company dinosaur exhibit at the 1933-34 Chicago World's Fair, including Betty Harris, wearing light colored suit, standing in center, 1934. Image courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

was special."[106] Handsome and popular, Harris often appeared in the Pittsburgh Courier's "Talk O' The Town" gossip column, which glowingly described social life and successful business.

Outside his studio, Harris had a vibrant practice documenting everyday life in Pittsburgh. He earned the nickname "One Shot" for his confident technique, capturing a subject in a single try. The "one shot" method was also a frugal one, since Harris had to buy his own flashbulbs. Like Palmer, Harris's candid images document Black subjects enjoying leisure activities or vacations. For example, Harris documents his family exploring the Sinclair Oil Company's dinosaur exhibit at the 1934 Chicago World's Fair (Figure 31). In Palmer's archive, we also find tourism images, in which he visits what looks like a roadside crystal quarry (Figure 32). Harris and Palmer complicate the myth that all Black citizens were unable to buy luxury items or enter white-

[106] Deborah Willis, "Introduction," in *Teenie Harris, Photographer: Image, Memory, History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press : published in cooperation with Carnegie Museum of Art, 2011), xiv.

Figure 32 Unknown photographer, John Palmer at crystal quarry.. John E. Palmer Photography Collection. Series I: Palmer's Studio, 1940s-1960s; Subseries F: Informal Photographs; Working Women. Box 16, Folder 4. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

dominated leisure spaces. Their images "spoke volumes about African American mobility, literally and socially."[107]

Harris became the staff photographer for the *Courier* in 1941, which was then the most prolific and wide-reaching Black newspaper in the country. The newspaper boasted fourteen regional offices and a staff of 350 , and Harris' images were seen by Black readers from coast to coast. While his practice focused on uplifting images, he also covered solemn topics for the *Courier* including poor living conditions, Jim Crow protests, and police brutality. Once again we see a divergence between Palmer's disaster images and Harris' political photographs, yet both men documented the challenges that Black residents faced in their respective cities.[108]

[107] Cheryl Finley, "The Practice of Everyday Life," in *Teenie Harris*, 66.

[108] Additionally, both men's practices were shaped by practical constraints. Their studios were decorated with simple furniture, focusing attention on sitters instead of their surroundings. While this minimalist setup was modern, it also likely resulted from the photographers' spatial and financial restrictions. Harris purchased his own supplies while working full-time for the Courier, and Palmer was also responsible for his own materials as a self-employed businessman.

Figure 33 J.P. Ball & Son, *Portraits of William Biggerstaff*, 1896. Courtesy of the Montana Historical Society Research Center, Photographic Archives, Helena, Montana.

Extending our gaze further, what might we gain by linking Palmer to more distant African American photographers active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? We do not know whether Palmer knew of or was in contact with the individuals I draw together, yet in this process, I aim to demonstrate how an art historian might construct new and creative frameworks for reading an archive. First, I want to travel back to the advent of photography in the United States. J.P. Ball was a Black portraitist and one of the first professional photographers in America. In 1896, Ball photographed William Biggerstaff, who was convicted of murder and hanged (Figure 33). Ball created a sensitive triptych of portraits of Biggerstaff before, during, and after his execution in West Montana. Awaiting execution, Biggerstaff is pictured as a refined, well-dressed middle-class citizen, who thoughtfully holds his right hand to his chin. Ball then documented the execution itself, capturing the stares of white men who surround Biggerstaff's covered face. Finally, Ball photographed Biggerstaff in a casket, once again in his suit with his face uncovered. Ball

framed all three photos in monogrammed cards labeled "J.P. Ball & Sons," thus visually equating these "criminal" photographs with professional portraits. Ball's pre-and postmortem portraits create a revisionist frame around the central lynching image, emphasizing Biggerstaff's complex personhood and dignity before and after death. Shawn Michelle Smith writes that these portraits were "celebrating him as a man with a family and a community, of which his photographer, J.P. Ball, was himself a member."[109]

During his time in the military, Palmer also witnessed trials, convictions, and executions of Black men by white superiors after the Camp Logan riot. We might link his military portraits to Ball's triptych of William Biggerstaff, in that both photographers captures their sitters' hoped-for salvation in the face of racist persecution. Black servicemen sought to prove their patriotism and citizenship, yet Palmer saw his peers re-inscribed as threatening criminals. Similarly, Ball witnessed Biggerstaff's trial and claims of self-defense, but watched as he was sentenced to death. Biggerstaff and Black servicemen were already condemned despite their middle-class aspirations, and Palmer and Ball's portraits capture them teetering precipitously on the brink of judgment. Even after his conviction, Ball's portraits allow Biggerstaff to momentarily surpass the confines of the criminal mugshot.

W.E.B. Du Bois explored the mugshot/ portrait divide in his photography exhibition for the 1900 Paris Exposition. "American Negro" featured 363 photographs of African Americans by an unidentified photographer, including portraits of middle-class sitters pictured head-on and in profile before unadorned backgrounds (Figure 34). Exploring their troubling likeness to criminal mugshots, Smith argues that Du Bois'

[109] Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds. *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 326.

portraits challenge the idea of an imagined "Negro criminality" inscribed onto bodies and images of African Americans. Smith writes,

> When projected through the eyes of white others, the image of the African American middle-class individual often transmuted into the mugshot of an African American criminal. It is precisely this transformation of the Black image in the eyes of white beholders (a transformation from middle-class portrait into criminal mugshot) that Du Bois' 'American Negro' portraits unmask.[110]

Du Bois employed the visual language of mugshots in order to trouble the distinction between middle-class propriety and criminality. "Every work of photographic art has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the archives of the police."[111] Du Bois is "destabilizing oppositional paradigms" of propriety and race by showing that the bodies of African Americans were already inscribed as separate from white middle-class norms and under constant surveillance. Du Bois wrote of this double bind, "the Negro is much more criminal as a free man than he was as a slave."[112] Du Bois argued that the myth of "Negro criminality" inscribed on Black bodies and enforced to perpetuate economic and social inequality. We can juxtapose Du Bois' unsettling images with Ball and Palmer's photographs, which also toe the line between criminality and

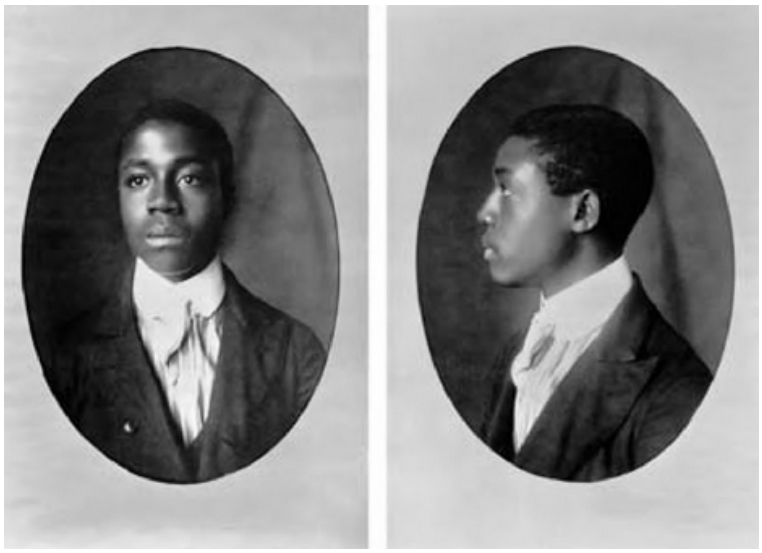

Figure 34 From *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A.*, compiled by W. E. B. Du Bois, 1900. Daniel Murray Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[110] Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Looking at One's Self Through the Eyes of Others': W. E. B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition." *African American Review* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 585.
[111] Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 16.
[112] Smith, "Looking at One's Self Through the Eyes of Others," 583.

freedom. Whether the photographs picture free or incarcerated Black men, the subjects have already been deemed criminal, and thus forbidden from obtaining middle-class comforts and safety enjoyed by their white peers.

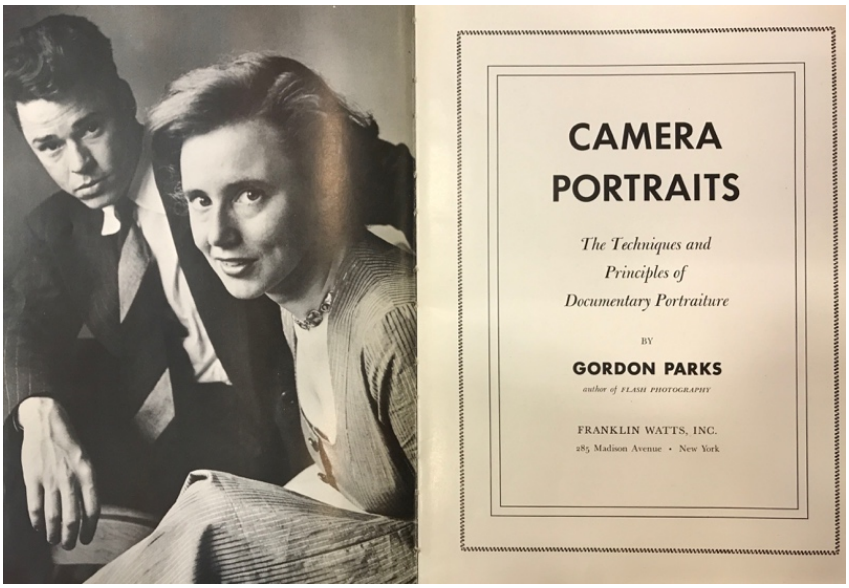

Figure 35 Gordon Parks, Frontispiece to *Camera Portraits: The Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture*, 1948. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

In addition to fighting visualized racism, Black photographers sought to make compelling portraits that would stand the test of time. Jumping ahead to 1948, Gordon Parks published *Camera Portraits: The Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture* as an instructional manual for photographers (Figure 35). In the opening essay, Parks begins by describing the gravity of the portraitist's task:

> Regardless of the medium used to facilitate it, portraiture is the pictorial representation of an individual and it can be challenging, interesting and historically significant – capable of embracing an era and the people who exist within it. Since our chosen medium of expression is the camera, we must understand its function. It is a mechanized instrument and should be utilized as a journalist does his typewriter or a brush: freely, unconsciously, and creatively… There must be a compromise between the mental interpretation and the mechanical operation: interpretation being always foremost in the ultimate result.[113]

[113] Gordon Parks, *Camera Portraits: The Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture* (New York: F. Watts, 1948), 4.

Parks encourages photographers to become completely comfortable with the technical limitations of their medium, so as to be as flexible as possible in the "mental interpretation" of their subjects. He also recommends that "the photographer should have some pre-knowledge of his sitter, for this knowledge will most immediately direct the approach." Parks' prerequisites for making portraits thus align with my claim that a portrait is most fully activated by a viewer (or in this case, maker) who is familiar with the pictured subject. In addition to linking photographers with journalists and painters, Parks compares portraitists to musical conductors, writing that both must be attuned to the "subtle nuances and expressive tones" which represent their sitter's intended "message to the world."[114] Encouraging his peers to sympathize with "the languages of music and photography," Parks thus argues that portraits can and must resonate beyond the aesthetic. This connection between photography and the "aural" is further drawn out by Fred Moten, who proposes new methods for analyzing historical images. He warns against falling into the trap of "ocularcentricity," in which the historian flattens out the "nonconvergent audiovisuality" that floats around the photographic object.[115] Parks would concur with Moten: the photographer must attend to these intangible forces in order to make an image tat visualizes a sitter's complex personhood.

Parks' essay is followed by dozens of his iconic portraits, each accompanied by a short text describing its making. These vignettes provide precious context and narratives which enliven Parks' photographs, adding layers of "living memory" to the portraits and their subjects. I was also struck by Parks' deceptively simple term "documentary portraiture." In discourses on photography, the terms "documentary" and "portrait" are often binaries placed in opposition, yet Parks seamlessly combines them in a book title to

[114] Ibid, 5.
[115] Moten, *In the Break,* 223.

summarize his career. This phrase encapsulates the approach I aim to take in analyzing Palmer's photographs: as images of real individuals ("portraits") that also have aesthetic and social-historical (what art historians traditionally call "documentary") functions.

Figure 36 James VanDerZee, Untitled. *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

James VanDerZee also lived and worked in New York. While he is known best for his glamorous portraits and street scenes, I want to attend to his macabre, surrealist images of funerals. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* contains photographs of funeral ceremonies, open caskets, and mourners.[116] The book also includes interviews between the photographer and Camille Billops, in which VanDerZee explains his formal choices, recalls memories of shoots, and describes his goals as a photographer. Perhaps out of desire to hear similar words coming from Palmer, I was drawn in by VanDerZee's narratives.

[116] James VanDerZee, Owen Dodson, Toni Morrison, and Camille Billops. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y: Morgan & Morgan, 1978).

Many of VanDerZee's images are adorned with angels, doves, and Virgin Mary figures, superimposed using a double exposure technique to create otherworldly images that bridge reality and an imagined afterlife (Figure 36). While Palmer does not employ VanDerZee's double exposure methods, their funeral images contain important similarities. Both photographers take care to emphasize the mourners, thereby affirming the importance of communal grief. Like the pallbearers pictured in Palmer's photograph, VanDerZee captures scenes of collective mourning. He photographs parents cradling their deceased children, family members lovingly leaning over an open casket, and congregants in a massive church (Figure 37). Both photographers reiterate the fact that funerals are performed for the benefit of those who are bereaved. The body in the casket is simply an empty shell, and the activity of mourning and remembering the deceased is healing to their friends and family, who are left in the land of the living. As performative ritual, funerals are a space for sharing memories, music, food, and stories. By visualizing the social process of mourning, VanDerZee and Palmer see a glimmer of strength in the tragedy of death.

Figure 37 James VanDerZee, *Funeral of Blanche Powell*. Yale Visual Resources Collection, New Haven.

My interest in these funerary photographs perhaps stems from the fact that Palmer himself passed away over fifty years ago. This great temporal gap makes him hard to find in the present world. After months of searching online and physical archives, I have found

only a few sources that mention him by name. His obituary is short, printed in the *Galveston City Times* on March 8th, 1964, only mentions the time of his funeral. It does not describe his personality, or how others remembered him, which I had hoped to find. Still, Palmer's archive is weighty and insistent as a physical entity. When I leaf through his photographs, he feels present in them, like a ghost who haunts his former home. I imagine his hands lifting each photograph in and out of its chemical baths, or tucking it into a paper frame, or writing a note to himself on the back of a print. Photographs have a persistent haptic function: they circulate through the hands of makers, sitters, and recipients, coming to life as intimate and treasured mementos. Photographs become memories in tangible form, and the hands that once held them hover around like an aura. I attempt to elaborate this haunting – Palmer's simultaneous absence from our world and presence in his archive – yet I find myself grasping for words to describe it. "Thus we need to simultaneously recognize the present Black body, traumatized and creatively surviving, even while we must recover those marginalized, submerged, and transformed corps who haunt and destabilize the Enlightenment with its narrow rationalism and troubling spatial and temporal sequestration of the spirit world/ dead."[117]

Discussing Palmer within a cohort of his peers, we recognize that his vision alternately aligns with and diverges from other Black photographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Palmer presents a wide-ranging vision of Galveston, we must be careful not to see through his photographs as transparent historical documents.[118] Palmer's photographs represent his personal viewpoint: for every image that he chose to

[117] Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital*, 4.

[118] Here I call on Michel Foucault's concept of the "document," in which the historian believes that the archive contains self-evident, transparent objects. Speaking about the construction of knowledge and power, Foucault cautions against reading the archive as transparent fact, and instead encourages the historian to unpack the discursive function and systems of meaning that surround and create each object, as well as the archive itself. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 142-146.

make, print, or frame, there are innumerable other moments and scenes left undocumented. His unique vision compels us to acknowledge the paradox of documentary photographs: no individual can present an all-encompassing picture of his or her world. Analyzing Palmer alongside his peers helps to reveal the variability of their practices, even among a cohort of photographers who are relatively similar on paper.

In this vein, I aim to join art historians who challenge simplistic, racialized readings of objects, and who question the presumption of "authenticity" in artworks made by nonwhite artists. This has been a contentious topic for African American artists whose work has been studied through "the lens of anthropological discovery."[119] In the most blunt sense, critics often expect Black artists' work to embody and narrate the experience of being Black. White art historians have historically fallen into the trap of asking: how is this artwork about Blackness?[120] While this is not an inherently problematic question to ask – particularly for artists whose work engages with the Black experience and diasporic consciousness – it should not be the dominant frame for analyzing African American artists and artworks. Late in his life, James Baldwin described the quagmire Black artists face:

> You see, whites want Black writers to mostly deliver something as if it were an official version of the Black experience. But the vocabulary won't hold it, simply. No true account really of Black life can be held, can be contained, in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based. But they won't let you do that. And when you go along, you find yourself very quickly painted into a corner; you've written yourself into a corner…[121]

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[119] Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 137.

120 For an extremely thorough and sophisticated discussion of the quandary Black artists face, see Darby English's text *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

121 Baldwin's words are worth quoting further: "You know, I was trying to tell the truth and it takes a long time to realize that you can't – there's no point in going to the mat, so to speak, no point in going to Texas again. There's no point in saying this again. It's been said, and it's been said, and it's been said. It's been heard and not heard. You are a broken motor. You're a running motor and you're repeating, you're repeating, you're repeating, and it causes a breakdown, lessening of willpower. And sooner or later your will gives out, it has to. You're lucky if it's a physical matter. Most times it's spiritual." "The Last

Visualizing or writing "an official version of the Black experience" is an impossible task for any artist. Because the concept of Blackness is so multivalent, contradictory, and complex, it cannot be "contained in the American vocabulary" without simultaneously destroying it. Black artists accepted by the white public find themselves condemned to repeat stereotypes, "written yourself into a corner," while the artist who attempts a "true account" is seen as radical, or exiled from the historical narrative. Yet Baldwin strives for this singularity, and to be seen as a powerful, indefatigable voice. He continues, "I fought to make you look at me. Because I was not born to be what someone said I was. I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only."[122]

The goal of this chapter has been to ground Palmer's practice in his historical moment and expand our readings of his photographs. I have aimed to situate Palmer among likely peers as well as imagined ones, including individuals who are spatially and temporally distant from Palmer. While I have drawn together historical contexts and discursive frameworks for Palmer's archive, his photographs possess an intractable complexity which can never be fully resolved through art historical analysis. Trouillot writes of historic monuments, "Too solid to be unmarked, too conspicuous to be candid, they embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hands – hence the mystery of their battered walls. We suspect that their concreteness holds secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences."[123] While "the ambiguities of history" are never resolved, we can weave together a more expansive and challenging framework for analyzing Palmer's photographs: not simply as historical images, but as archival objects with vast discursive and theoretical potential.

Interview." Interview with Quincy Trope, St. Paul de Vence, France, November 1987, in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014).

[122] Ibid.

[123] Trouillot, 29-30.

Epilogue: Bringing the Archive to Life

This project has explored how John Palmer's photographic archive visualizes "complex personhood" on multiple levels. In this effort, I have aimed to foreground Palmer's sitters and remember the images' intended functions. Expanding Gordon's concept, I take up complex personhood as an overarching framework to stress that Palmer's photographs depicts real, singular people. Acknowledging this fundamental principle demands that historians approach archives with a radically reshaped mentality, no longer understanding these objects as transparent documents or historical illustrations. By searching for complex personhood in this archive, we can arrive at richer understandings of photography and its purposes within Galveston's African American community. It is my hope that this research will be helpful to a diverse cohort of future viewers, and that Palmer's archive will inspire additional scholarship, exhibitions, and collaborative projects between researchers and Galvestonians. When thinking back to my goals at the start of this project, I remember being moved and encouraged by John Berger's words: "Memory implies a certain act of redemption. What is remembered has been saved from nothingness. What is forgotten has been abandoned."[124] While analyzing historic photographs is a difficult task, we must continue to search for unstudied photography collections and build up more robust, thorough, and nuanced interpretations of these archives.

With this overarching goal, I have aimed to present new frameworks in which to analyze Palmer's archive. Rather than coming to these photographs with preconceived conclusions — about Black history, everyday life in Texas, documentary photography, and so forth — we must primarily acknowledge the complex personhood of their subjects. Housing these photographs in a nationally-renowned institutional archive has changed the

124 Berger, *About Looking*, 54.

way that these objects are viewed. Where single photographs were once treasured or displayed in private spaces, these portraits and snapshots are now grouped together, classified into types, and filed away in temperature-controlled storage facilities. These photographs were not meant to be dissected by scholars, and thus we must reckon with their jarring displacement into the archive.

Alan Trachtenberg writes of a portrait photograph, "It's a two-sided self, public exterior/ private interior, whose performance as 'portrait' represents a free act of presenting oneself, as image, into social discourse."[125] Commissioning a portrait is a personal decision and a gesture that marks a subject's control over his or her image. The phenomenological context of the archive has stripped away sitters' original agency by making their portraits available for academic scrutiny. bell hooks writes, "The history of Black liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access."[126] How did Palmer's sitters want to be seen, and who did they want to see them? How would these men and women react if they knew that their portraits were available to researchers? Would they be troubled by researchers' abilities to pick through such formerly private images, and make conclusions about their subjects' lives, histories, or communities? Taken away from their original community and context, the archive has distanced these portraits from their original function. A portrait in the archive no longer "represents the free act of presenting oneself, as image, into social discourse," because the researcher, curator, or institution now controls the discourse. "Where stories are disappearing (or else are being reduced to museographical objects), there is a loss of space: deprived of narrations (as one sees it happen in both the city and the countryside), the group of the individual regresses toward the disquieting,

125 Trachtenberg, "Lincoln's Smile," 12.
126 hooks, "In Our Glory," 57.

fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality."[127] In foregrounding the concept of complex personhood, I have aimed to prevent Palmer's photographs from "being reduced to museographical objects" or flattened into static, anonymous artifacts.

This thesis has presented two primary suggestions as to how contemporary scholars can responsibly analyze historic photographs. First, I have attempted to reframe the archival researcher's mindset. I want to present an alternative mode of looking at these historic photographs, in which a viewer or scholar remembers that Palmer's photographs depict real people – complex persons – who cannot be fully known through their portraits. Rather than see these images as transparent windows onto the past, or as historical illustrations, the viewer must recognize them as personal objects that have been disturbed and decontextualized in the archive. These photographs, meant to be personal keepsakes, have been removed from their original communities of viewing, and cracked open to be scrutinized by distant strangers.

Second, I have encouraged viewers to remain comfortable with these images' opacity, letting them remain unknowable to a certain degree. While I have presented social, political, and local frameworks in which to place Palmer's images, I have not attempted to explicate or reveal encoded facts within them. I do not claim to be an omniscient scholar, holding the proverbial key to unlocking the photographs' hidden meanings. The true key-holders are past and present Galvestonians and their descendants, who look upon these photographs and associate them with "living memory." Discussing her experience of working with opaque or missing archives, Saidiya Hartman writes, "Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method."[128] As a

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127 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 123.

128 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (July 17, 2008): 12

historian, I have attempted to maintain such "narrative restraint" and admit what I may never know about the photographs I have held in my hands.

In this vein, the next step in analyzing Palmer's archive should be to digitize the photographs and make them available online (if not publicly, then for on-site browsing at the Ransom Center). A small portion of Palmer's sitters are identified by name, and we can likely locate some of these individuals' descendants. Once identified, these descendants should decide whether or not their family photographs will remain visible and accessible to researchers. If they wish to collaborate with the Ransom Center, these men and women can also provide interviews, oral histories, or personal archives to supplement Palmer's photographs. These community-sourced narratives can create a richer and more vibrant history of Galveston's Settlement. This history can be simultaneously institutionalized (preserved in the archive for posterity) and collaborative (community-written), and remain active and open to further contributions, much like Galveston's Old Cultural Center.

Oral histories are crucial vehicles for preserving community histories, and therefore should be added to the Ransom Center archive. Archival repositories have historically eschewed these sources, yet technological and digital storage solutions have made it possible to include such materials in institutional collections. Still, archives prefer to collect texts. De Certeau writes of this quandary: "The 'oral' is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the 'scriptural' is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition."129 Archives have historically made little room for the "oral," and prioritized the "scriptural" because the it can be stored neatly in folders and boxes. The oral – "the magical world of voices and tradition" – reveals the true meaning and function of historic artifacts, yet cannot be filed or flattened into the archive. Although I have argued

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129 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 135.

that Palmer's photographs embody such a "magical world of voices and tradition," this orality is not present enough in my small project. Oral histories and interviews should be fundamental to further analyses of Palmer's photographic archive.

John Berger writes, "The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory."[130] I have attempted to discuss Palmer's archive as an "alternative photography" created by and attached to Galveston's Black community. In analyzing any photographic archive, we must remember the complex personhood of both the photographer and their subjects. Forgetting the complicated, layered, contradictory, and subjective functions of these photographs collapses them into historical relics and effectively destroys them. Yet by acknowledging the complex personhood in this archive, we glimpse the true power of Palmer's photographs, and his images begin to breathe life again.

130 Berger, *About Looking*, 58.

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